

Outbreak Company: Volume 14

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Outbreak Company

14

THE POWER OF MOE



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FORGET
ABOUT IT,
OKAY, ELVIA?
I'LL DO IT
MYSELF!



YA DON'T
HAVE TO
WORRY SO
MUCH! I'LL
GET YOU
NICE AND
CLEAN!





Myusel Fourant

Maid hired by the Holy Eldant Empire to serve their esteemed guest, Shinichi. She's an uncommon sight in this world: a half-elf (her mother was an elf and her father was a human). She served briefly in the military, and knows some magic she can use in a pinch. She's ashamed of her heritage, but she's a very serious young woman who's dedicated to her work. Okay, so maybe she's a little clumsy. To her surprise, Shinichi treats her just like anyone else, and she's started to feel an affection for him that goes beyond simple respect for her employer... She was one of the first people of Eldant to learn some Japanese, and now helps teach at Amutech's school.



Who Are These People?

Kanou Shinichi

General Manager of Amutech, the general entertainment company; and the hero of our story. Amutech is a joint venture between the Holy Eldant Empire and the Japanese government, falling under the authority of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. The company's goal is to build international (or interdimensional) goodwill by importing Japanese anime, manga, games, and so on—basically, otaku stuff. Shinichi was a shut-in for nearly a year after entering high school, but his parents finally told him he had to get a job. Well, he found one, and before he knew what was happening, it landed him in another world! He has a dad (a light-novel author), a mom (an ero-game designer), and a little sister (Shizuki). He's otaku to the bone, and he's always true to himself—sometimes to a fault. Myusel has taught him to use just a little magic.



Petralka an Eldant-III

Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire. She's not as young as she looks, but boy is she cute. (Not very well-endowed, though.) Her natural curiosity made her receptive to the Japanese government's plan to import otaku culture. In fact, she's a bit of an otaku herself—she was one of the first people in Eldant to learn some Japanese, and she did it by watching anime. (So it is possible!) She actively supports Shinichi and his activities.



Koganuma Minori

Once a Private First-Class with the First Division of the Eastern Army of the Ground Self-Defense Force, Minori has since been promoted to Sergeant. Her JSDF assignment is a zombie unit with skills as sharp as those of the Rangers. In Eldant, she serves as Shinichi's bodyguard. She is one rotten girl, though, and God help Shinichi and his friends if she runs out of BL books to read. She's a cosplayer, too. These personal qualities make her especially fit for service in the Eldant Empire. Like Shinichi, she moonlights as a teacher at Amutech's school.

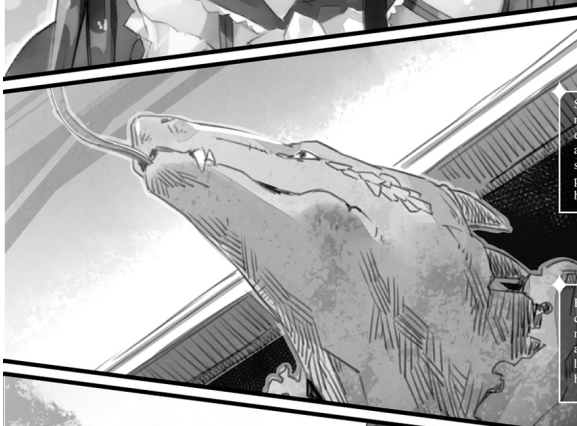
Elvia Harneiman

Werewolf and self-proclaimed wandering artist. The truth of the matter is, she's a spy with the intelligence division of the Kingdom of Bahairam, a neighboring nation with no love lost for the Eldant Empire. Luckily for Shinichi & co., she's not a very highly ranked spy—or for that matter, a very good one. Minori caught her busily making sketches of Shinichi's mansion and Amutech's school, which Bahairam was convinced were military installations. Shinichi put in a good word for her, though, and now she's the company's artist-in-residence. She picked up the "anime" art style right away.



Ayasaki Hikaru

Two things to know about Hikaru: one, he's a cross-dresser; two, the person he usually cross-dresses as is Suiren from *Rose Princess*. The Japanese government sent him to Eldant to take over from Shinichi. Hikaru's not just a pretty face; after all, he knows his otaku stuff, can talk like nobody's business, and pretty much seems (well, seemed) practically perfect in every way. The one thing he didn't know was anything about what things were really like in Eldant, and after one of his plans went completely off the rails (and Shinichi saved him), he now helps out at Amutech as Shinichi's assistant.



Brooke Darwin

Shinichi's gardener. Calm. Composed. One might almost say cold-blooded. Let's see, what else? Wise. Long-tongued. Scaly. Huh? Oh! He's a lizardman. So there's that. Brooke is a former soldier and something of a hero among his people, but circumstances forced him away from his home and family to live among the humans.



Cerise Darwin

Brooke's wife. The daughter of an important chieftain, she's something like a lizardman nobility. Circumstances conspired to keep her and her husband apart for a while, but now they live together at Shinichi's mansion, where Cerise helps Myusel with the housework.

Matoba Jinzaburou

Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau. (Remember that from the first page here? No? It's the organization set up by the Japanese government to facilitate contact with the Holy Eldant Empire.) Matoba can appear very laid-back and even easygoing, but he's no one to sneeze at. Otaku and their mysterious ways, though, are something he knows nothing about.





Garius en Cordobal

Petra's cousin, a member of the royal family, and also a knight. (That's some resume.) Garius's parents (Petra's aunt and uncle) and Petra's parents once fought over the succession, leading to their collective and mutual death by poisoning. As a compromise between the factions that had been backing these respective claimants to the throne, Petra was made Empress while Garius was assigned to be her Regent. He himself, though, has scant interest in the crown, and does all he can to support Petra, especially as regards military matters. He's always had a special interest in men (if you know what we mean), and combined with Minor's instinctive appreciation for the same, well...

Romilda Guld

A dwarf girl. Her father Rydell Guld is a famous craftsman and a counselor in the Eldant Empire. He owns one of the biggest workshops in Marin, the imperial capital. Romilda attends Shinichi's otaku culture school, and is a pretty accomplished otaku herself by now. Elves and dwarves are supposed to get along like cats and dogs, but Romilda and Lock have become fast friends.



Lock Slayson

An elf boy. His father is the imperial counselor Eric Slayson. Like Romilda, Lock attends Shinichi's school and has absorbed the ways of the otaku. Minor saved him from a near-fatal situation once, and he's felt something he thinks is love for her ever since.



Chapter One

Ama-no-Iwato?



Chapter 1: Ama-no-Iwato?

The clattering of the cart reverberated through the hallway. I tried to walk quickly but carefully, making sure the food on the dish riding on the cart didn't spill anywhere. When I brought food to his room, I covered it with a *cloche* to keep dust off, but it wouldn't stop the food from gradually going cold, starting the moment I put it on the plate. It couldn't reach him fast enough.

Shinichi-sama had said once that food was delicious when it was served so hot you had to blow on it while you ate, and so whenever I served anything grilled or fried, I made sure to heat the plate ahead of time by soaking it in hot water, and furthermore, I was careful to serve it in a timely manner.

"Shinichi-sama..."

In just a matter of moments, I was outside his door. A door I had become intimately used to seeing—or at least passing by. The door to the room of my master, Shinichi-sama.

And yet, I felt a hesitation as I went to knock. Obviously I couldn't just stand out here; the food would go cold, and nothing good would come of that. So I took a deep breath, knocked, and called out. "Shinichi-sama, it's Myusel. I've brought your dinner."

Shinichi-sama was on the other side of the door; he had to be. He must have heard me speak to him. I strained my ears so as not to miss the slightest sound emanating from the room, and I detected motion within. My ears, the bequest of my elven blood, could hear Shinichi-sama getting up and coming over to the door.

Today—today, at last, he would let me see his face.

Such, at least, was the hope that flared faintly in my chest. But...

"Oh..."

The door didn't open; instead, a single sheet of paper was slid out underneath it. I knelt and retrieved it. It contained a short sentence in Ja-panese. I haven't any education, so I can't read or write the Eldant language, but Shinichi-sama was kind enough to teach me his own, so that I can read hiragana easily.

Just leave it there, the note said. Please.

It was in Shinichi-sama's handwriting; I would know it anywhere. He had been kind enough to write the whole thing in hiragana so it would be easy for me to read.

"U-Um... Sir...!" I spoke almost before I knew what I was doing,

clutching the piece of paper. But I didn't know how to continue, so I didn't say anything at all. Trying to make excuses at this point would just be pitiful. All I could do was wait for Shinichi-sama's anger to pass.

I only let out a sigh and parked the cart next to the wall. "It's right beside the door," I said, but as I expected, there was no answer. "Shinichi-sama..."

I turned and went toward the kitchen, back down the hallway the way I had come.

As I walked, I un-crinkled the note in my hand and looked at it again. How many was this now? Breakfast, lunch, and dinner—three notes a day. I had lost track of how long it had been since Shinichi-sama had shut himself up in his room. I got one of these pieces of paper each time I brought him a meal, but I never saw his face, or even heard his voice.

I was flooded with loneliness. And what was more, I was worried about Shinichi-sama's health—though you might think it silly of me after I had subjected him to such violence.

"Shinichi-sama..." The whisper dropped from my lips and fell to the ground. The depression was almost like a physical presence behind me, pressing in, darkening the hallway as I walked along.





I pressed my ear to the door, listening carefully. I waited until I heard Myusel—Myusel Fourant, my maid who had so kindly brought me food—retreat safely down the hallway, and then I slowly counted to ten before I opened the door.

I glanced right, then left—no one around. Just as Myusel had said, the cart of food was positioned neatly next to the wall. It was the sort of thing commonly used to deliver fancy Western dishes, everything placed under a half-spherical metal covering—I guess it was called a *cloche*. I delicately picked it up and found my dinner, all neatly arranged on a single plate.

I pulled my dinner, the cart, and everything into my room and locked the door, then moved the plate to my desk along with a silver knife, fork, and spoon. I sat in my chair and clapped my hands together. “*Itadakimasu*,” I murmured, like any good Japanese does before a meal, and then I started in on the food Myusel had made for me.

Ahh... Delicious.

Myusel had always been an excellent cook. The food had cooled off a little, sure, but it was of such high quality that it was still good. Sure, it could add to the flavor to eat at the table with everybody jabbering around you, but savoring a meal all alone wasn’t bad, either.

That’s right. For the past week, I had been taking my meals alone in my room. Other than taking baths and using the bathroom—both of which I did in the dead of night, when everyone else was asleep—I didn’t emerge from my room. For a while, I’d had the excuse that bandages and muscular pain had kept me bedridden, but all that was better by now.

I spontaneously found myself a *hikikomori*, a shut-in, someone who wouldn’t come out of his room. This room.

The reason... well, it went back to a commotion from a good ten days ago.

Myusel Fourant.

Petralka an Eldant III.

And Elvia Harneiman.

The three girls had been in a war for the heart of Kanou Shinichi (that’s me). To be even more direct, I had discovered that love triangles (or would that be a love square?) are hell. Of course, I hadn’t touched any of them, so I’m not sure if you can call it any kind of love shape...

Something called “forbidden armor” had been found deep in the

storehouses of Eldant Castle, and the girls had ended up wearing it. It caused them to spout their true feelings with no filter at all, and had ultimately led to a battle with me as the prize.

In hopes of stopping them, I had put on a suit of forbidden armor myself and jumped into the fray—but then *I* didn't have any filter either, and the enraged girls ended up using me as a punching bag.

I had been on bed rest until the wounds healed. They hadn't been hitting *me* so much as the forbidden armor, so despite some nasty bruises, I was back to normal in a couple of days. And honestly, the only reason it had taken that long was because, carried away by the exuberance of piloting a superweapon, I had put on a bit too much of a show and ended up unbearably sore. So being made a punching bag hadn't actually been my main problem—although without the forbidden armor, which was designed to enhance people's abilities in battle, taking a punch from another suit of forbidden armor would probably have caused me to explode.

But anyway.

Bed rest meant no school and no work, just stuck in my room reading manga and playing cell phone games to pass the time in between the meals Myusel brought me. I declined visitors, claiming I needed to focus on getting better. Since I had turned down a visit from Petralka, the Empress of the Eldant Empire, I could hardly go admitting anyone else.

I was, if you will, a completely legitimate (?) home security guard. And you know what? It was nicer than I had expected. Even when I turned down Petralka, it wasn't so much because I was really afraid it would somehow interfere with my recovery, but rather because I was feeling so restless.

I had attracted the attentions of three different girls, and I found myself unable to choose any one of them. Then I had managed to tick them all off by saying everything I *really* thought. My heart wasn't strong enough for me, after all that, to smile and say, "Hey, thanks for the visit!"

It was just too much, in any number of ways.

What other effects had the forbidden armor had? Well, maybe the girls felt better after beating me up together, because Myusel, Petralka, and Elvia were getting along famously, as if there had never been any argument, and it didn't even seem like they were still mad at me. But... nonetheless, it was extremely difficult for me to face any of them.

"Sigh..."

Just the memory of it was enough to bring a sigh to my lips. And that wasn't even the only problem I had. Apparently, when Loek and Romilda, two of my students, had come to check on me, somebody—

maybe Minori-san or Hikaru-san—had spilled the beans to them about the forbidden armor. And then—in the style of a telephone game, with some details dropping out or changing and others being added—the story of the battle had spread among the other students.

And I could hardly go to school like that.

I could just imagine the scene if I did: the whispers, the pointing and laughing. I wouldn't be able to endure it. I had come to a whole separate world—had hoped to do so many things differently, and sometimes had even managed it—and here I was, still a laughingstock.

Why does this have to happen to me?!

Er... Well, actually, I was painfully aware of why. But the point was, here in this other world, I was a shut-in once again. That was twice now, in two different worlds. Not that I was keeping score.

As I ate, silently, I kept my eyes fixed on the LCD monitor on my desk. It was showing the display from my computer, currently the interface screen of a gal game. An adorable 2D girl was looking at me, her eyes moist.

So cute. She was just so sweet.

A text window was open just below her picture, a cursor flashing as it awaited my choice. This game had been on my pile for a while, languishing with all the others I hadn't been able to get to because I'd been busy. Now that I was finally starting it, I discovered how lovable and moe-able the heroines were.

"Oh, sweet Haruka-tan..." I whispered, leaning forward in my chair. I hadn't had a character hit my moe buttons so hard in a long time. She was sweet and pure, totally committed, an upright leading lady of a kind you don't see much of these days. Yet she deliberately avoided wearing her long, black hair down, keeping it in manageable twintails instead. It was transcendent, but at the same time, she was an excellent cook, loved to do housework—really the domestic type. But it was the occasional flashes of clumsiness that really lit my fire.....

Long pause.

What was this feeling of déjà vu I was getting? Eh, probably nothing.

"Anyway, I can hardly bear for this route to end! I wonder if they'll make an anime out of this game. Or maybe we could get a sequel or a spinoff. Bah, but it would be pointless if the spinoff didn't have Haruka-tan in it!"

The terrible truth... was that I was enjoying my shut-in life. I had my excuses, my reasons, my proximate causes, like being embarrassed to see Myusel and the others, or being afraid of being laughed at at school. But once I had settled into this lifestyle, I kind of got stuck in it—or maybe I should say it was so comfortingly familiar, so

downright pleasant, that I had trouble getting out again.

Besides, I had all these games I hadn't played, books I hadn't read, DVDs I hadn't watched. I just hadn't had the free time. But now I had all the time I needed, and Myusel was bringing meals right to my door. I could do whatever I wanted. Okay, so I had to bathe after everyone had gone to sleep, like I mentioned, but other than that, staying shut away in my room really had no downsides.

"I even remembered how to use a water bottle!"

Some people might have frowned at that, but there was no one here to shoot back at me. I was alone in my room. I could eat in bed, play my gal games buck naked, it didn't matter. No one would scold me. The girls on my monitor would just sit there smiling at me until I clicked on something.

What release! What freedom!

I sped through the meal Myusel had brought me, clapped my hands together again—"Go-chisou-sama!"—put the plate back on the cart, and reached for the mouse to resume my game.

"Hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo..." I couldn't help chuckling to myself as I went back to working on the heroine.

Let me take this opportunity to be completely honest: the shut-in life is the best!



I looked up when I heard the long, heavy sigh. Minori-sama had her cheek pressed against the dinner table, looking rather melancholy.

"Um, Minori-sama, was the food not to your liking?"

"Huh?" She blinked in confusion, then shook her head quickly when she realized what I had asked. "No, no, that's not it at all. Your cooking was the best, Myusel, just like it always is." She smiled, although it wasn't quite a happy one.

Koganuma Minori-sama. Shinichi-sama's bodyguard and a member of an organization called the Jay Ess Dee Eff. This was, I gathered, the army of Ja-pan, though when I asked Minori-sama whether I understood that correctly, she just gave me a half-smile and said I should "think of it as something a little different." I didn't really understand.

But setting that aside...

"But that sigh..."

"Minori-san's sigh can mean only one thing."

This came from Ayasaki Hikaru-sama, likewise seated at the table. Like Shinichi-sama, Hikaru-sama came to spread Ja-pan's otaku culture in the Eldant Empire. He was originally chosen to replace Shinichi-sama, but now he was more of a subordinate, almost a

companion.

He sipped his tea luxuriously, putting the white ceramic cup to his lips, giving the slightest shake of his long, black hair. He looked quite beautiful and refined, radiating a sort of eroticism that appealed even to me, a woman. I would never be able to be as elegant as he was. Seeing him there, effortlessly beautiful, it felt like it must have been some kind of mistake that he was a man.

“You mean... Shinichi-sama?”

I poured him another cup of after-dinner tea, and Minori-sama gave another long sigh. “What else could it be?” she said.

“I’m very sorry...” I bent myself nearly in half in my bow of apology.

It was my fault that Shinichi-sama wouldn’t come out of his room.

But Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama both shook their heads and smiled.

“Why should you apologize, Myusel?” Minori-sama said.

“Yeah, it’s not your fault.”

“But—” I said, and stopped. I heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Elf ears are not just long for show. We have much better hearing than other races. I’m just half elf, but even so, I had the best hearing of anyone in the room. I could detect the approaching footsteps even though we were right in the middle of a conversation.

There were three people coming. I could even take a good guess who they were based on subtle differences in their footfalls.

“No reaction at all!”

The complaint came from a beautiful, but rather petite, girl with long, silver hair who appeared in the kitchen.

Empress Petralka an Eldant III. She was the ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire. Normally she would never even speak to someone of my station, let alone sit at the same table as me, but for a whole host of reasons, she had taken me into her fold and in fact treated me quite well.

“Are you certain Shinichi is in there?”

Behind the empress came a lovely man with silver hair just like hers. Minister Garius en Cordobal was Her Majesty’s cousin and head of the country’s military, including the royal guard. Finally there came...

“I could *smell* Shinichi-sama, I’m telling you!”

Elvia Harneiman-san. She had ears and a tail like those of an animal, because she was a beast person—a werewolf. She had also once been a spy for the neighboring Kingdom of Bahairam, but now she lived at this mansion (another rather long story). It seemed neither Her Majesty nor Minister Cordobal were suspicious of her any

longer, hence why she could walk casually along with them.

Her Majesty. And Elvia-san. When it came to Shinichi-sama, they and I had... Well, we had fought. I still trembled to remember it. Elvia-san was one thing, but for me, a subject of the Eldant Empire, to do battle with the revered Empress, should have been unthinkable. It could easily have resulted in me being beheaded, but Her Majesty, in her mercy, had quickly proclaimed that I was not to be punished.

“She was under the control of the ‘forbidden armor.’ As we were.”

This “forbidden armor” had an unfortunate way of bringing out whatever was most deeply buried in the wearer. We aren’t normally used to announcing our deepest secrets to everyone within hearing, or to being privy to the secrets of others. Confusion was the result, and honesty began to sound like fighting words, until we were carried away by the madness of it all. That was the primary problem with the forbidden armor. It was a bit like getting drunk on very strong wine. Thinking of it that way, it was obvious why the armor would have been forbidden.

“Shinichi-kun can be such a handful when he wants to,” Minori-sama sighed. “Her Majesty and Garius-san specifically came here to visit him...”

“Perhaps he failed to respond because he is collapsed in his room. Are you quite certain he is okay?”

“Myusel brought him dinner just a few minutes ago, and got her usual ‘letter’ back.” Minori-sama showed Her Majesty and the others the note. I received one of them each time I brought food, assuring me at least that Shinichi-sama was still alive. But we hadn’t seen his face in over a week. It was possible he could be quite sick, and still be well enough to write a letter. The thought made me distinctly uncomfortable.

“I suspect he’s fine,” Hikaru-sama said. “He’s probably just sleeping, or maybe taking a stab at that tower of unread books he had.”

“Here you are,” I said, presenting Her Majesty, Minister Cordobal, and Elvia-san with fresh cups of tea. Incidentally, the cup for Minister Cordobal was steaming hot, but I let Her Majesty’s and Elvia-san’s cool for a few minutes before serving them. Elvia-san lived here, of course, and the other two visited with some regularity, so I had learned their preferred temperatures.

“But in one sense, he is very ill,” Minori-sama said, her smile widening. “Though I guess I don’t blame him for feeling a little traumatized.” Feeling more than seeing her glance in my direction, I instinctively looked at the ground. Minori-sama had been present for the denouement of the events with the forbidden armor, so she could guess why Shinichi-sama had retreated to his room.

It really was my fault, I felt. My spirits had been so high—or at any rate, when I looked back I could see how weirdly excited I had been—that it had led me to the unconscionable act of raising a hand against Shinichi-sama, even if it was at the instigation of Her Majesty. We weren't striking Shinichi-sama personally, but rather the forbidden armor he was wearing, all in hopes of getting him out of it. But still... Her Majesty was one thing, but I, a mere maid, and Elvia-san, our household artist, had physically attacked our very master. Shinichi-sama himself had probably never expected us to do such a thing—of course it would have been a shock.

"Um... I..."

"I guess 's all my fault..." Elvia-san said, her tail drooping.

"No. There's one person at fault here, and it's Shinichi-san," Hikaru-sama said coolly. "He's a yutz, he doesn't know what he wants, and this is all his fault. Elvia, Myusel, you don't have anything to feel bad about. Frankly, I've been wanting to smack him myself."

"Uh...huh." Elvia-san and I looked at each other.

Hikaru-sama took a sip of tea and continued, "But even so, we can't leave him like this."

"At the very least, we need him to do his job," Minori-sama said, crossing her arms. "I know how busy he's been, and I was leaving him alone because I thought this might be a nice break, but... You're right. He can't live in his room. It's a pain in the neck, not being able to see him or even talk to him."

"It's like he thinks he's in the Heavenly Cave," Hikaru-sama said, his voice thick with sarcasm. "Although he's got the gender backwards."

"Heavenly Cave? Whazzat?" Elvia-san asked. This expression, *ama-no-iwato* in Japanese, was completely new to her—and to me, and Her Majesty, and Minister Cordobal. We looked at Hikaru-sama for an explanation.

"It's a Japanese myth," he said. "There was this goddess who got upset because of some unpleasant stuff that had happened to her. She shut herself up in her room and refused to come out, or so the story goes."

"That does indeed sound like Shinichi." Her Majesty, teacup in hand, pursed her lips.

Minori-sama gave a shrug. "It sure doesn't help that he's got experience doing this. He's weirdly, like, talented at being a shut-in. You know his parents smashed through his door with a chainsaw to get him to come out last time? That's what I heard, anyway. Now I believe it. Plus, the rooms around here have those magical locks on them."

Just as Minori-sama said, each room of this house was equipped

with a magical lock; if you didn't have the key, the door would never open, no matter what you did. I had a backup key for each room, but when the door was also locked from the inside, there wasn't much I could do. It would always be possible to use force: undo the magical lock with my backup key, then destroy the door—the entire wall, if necessary—to gain access to Shinichi-sama's room. But I hesitated to do that, knowing it would only hurt Shinichi-sama worse.

"Unfortunately, even if we bust in there, it won't solve the root problem," Hikaru-sama said, as if he had been reading my mind.

"Yeah, we've got to get him to come out of his own free will. It really is like the Heavenly Cave." Minori-sama didn't seem to have any fresh ideas, either, and she trailed off into grumbling. A moment later, though, she exclaimed, "Oh!" and clapped her hands. "You know what they say—when pushing doesn't work, try pulling."

"Meaning?" Minister Cordobal asked.

"We send *you* into Shinichi-kun's room, Garius-san. How about it?"

"Me?" Minister Cordobal gave her a quizzical look.

"That would bring Shinichi-kun rushing right out!"

For some reason, this seemed to make Minori-sama very happy. The minister was oddly warm towards the idea, too, to judge by the amused look on his face as he nodded and said, "I see, I see." Then he added, "Wouldn't that be opening a rather different door?"

"Let it open!"

"If mistrust of women is what's keeping him in there, it's not a great solution," Hikaru-sama said with a dry smile. "Anyway, getting in won't be easy."

"How about breaking the door down, or crawling in through the air duct?" Minori-sama suggested.

"You think these medieval-style houses have air ducts? And I vote no on busting the door down, too. We might get him out of the room for a moment, but he'd only find another one," Hikaru-sama replied.

"Boo." Minori-sama looked disappointed, but she didn't pursue the subject, or try to press her idea of sending the minister in. "If nothing else, I guess it's not as bad as the last time he went shut-in around here."

"Wait, there was a last time?" Hikaru-sama said. "Here in Eldant?"

"Oh yeah, I guess that was before you got here."

I remembered that time, myself. It was just shortly after Shinichi-sama had arrived in Eldant. He had started referring to himself as an "invader" sent from Ja-pan. The idea seemed to distress him very much. All this had been well before Hikaru-sama had come here.

"To be fair, I think it's just Myusel, Her Majesty, and Elvia that Shinichi-kun is terrified of, so if we really have to get in touch with him, I could do it. But I don't think I could manage much just arguing

with him through the door.”

“And you can’t just stand outside that door forever.”

“It would be nice if we could at least phone him, but there are no phones around h— oh.” Minori-sama clapped her hands as if she had just thought of something. “There’s no phone lines, but there is wireless LAN.”

“That’s right, an experimental network was introduced for this house and the school, wasn’t it? Although we’ve only been using it to back up the computers.”

“We could use a messenger program on there to fill in for a telephone.”

“That just might work...”

Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama were nodding at each other. I could only understand that they were talking about some sort of device from Ja-pan. “Wy-erless” and “meszenjers” didn’t mean much to me. Or any of the other locals in the room with me. All we could do was blink at each other.



The sky above was rosy, and the girl’s eyes were moist as she looked at me.

“Uh... Um...” She seemed to be getting up her nerve. Was it the twilight that made her cheeks look so red, or...? *“This might be my last chance to say anything. So I’m gonna say it. For real.”*

Oh ho! And what might she have to say to me? I proceeded delicately, aware of the pounding of my heart.

She glanced down ever so slightly. *“I... You know, Shinichi-kun, I’ve always...”*

“Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaamn straight! Here it comes!!” I pounded the fist of my left hand into the open palm of my right. The shy voice I could hear through my speakers, that flushing face I could see on my display. There was nothing more touching than the sweet befuddlement of a girl about to confess.

Ahh, the route is complete!

I had worked my way through one obnoxious branch after another, save-scumming along, and now all my effort would finally bear fruit...! I had effectively cleared this game’s transfer-student path. The old-friend and kouhai routes were the first things I took care of; all that was left was the sempai path, notorious for being the most difficult in the game. I guess to end up with Sempai, you had to clear the transfer-student path first, then shoot her down on your next playthrough.

Meaning, in short, that this game didn’t allow a harem ending.

Sure. Fair enough. Harem play, that was no good, right? No loyalty to your girl. Yep, uh-huh.

Pretty sure I feel a whole bunch of prickling in my heart right now, but I'm gonna ignore it!

"Ah, being a shut-in is great... And 2D is perfect...!" I clenched my fists in front of my chest, giving a rapturous sigh.

I'd been so busy with so many things recently that I hadn't had time to just sit down and really play through a gal game. It led to a pile of about a dozen games in my room that I had managed to import from Japan, which was great and all, but which I hadn't even cracked open the packaging on. Since I finally had a few minutes, I had opened one up and started in on it, only to be reminded how much fun it was.

"And they don't hit you! And since it's all branching paths, there's never a moment where the main girls look at each other and turn the place into a battlefield!"

What a wonderful thing, two dimensions!

I was up to my neck in moe at the prospect of the confession by the girl on the other side of the screen, but as a battle-tested "gal gamer," I knew that the first thing to do was keep a cool head. We were probably about to get into an avalanche of kiss scenes, but in order to be able to come back and enjoy this delicious moment in "memory mode" any time I wanted, it was imperative that I create a save.

Call up main menu. Click Save.

And that was when I noticed the flashing icon off to one side, outside the game window. Some kind of alert.

"What's this thing?"

I really doubted it was a virus or anything. I clicked on the icon.

A new window opened—an oblong chat window from a messenger application. This app let you talk one-on-one with people. It came preloaded on the machine, so it was no surprise it was there, but I had never paid it much mind. Messenger apps don't do a lot of good with no internet.

So why was I seeing it now?

The window indicated somebody was inviting me to chat.

"Oh," I said when I saw the username: Minori_K. "Minori-san?"

That's right—we'd had wireless LAN installed in the mansion as well as at the school not too long ago. There was too much interference trying to run a wire through the hyperspace wormhole, not to mention the risk of virus infection and information leakage, so there was no direct network connection between this world and Japan. Matoba-san—the bureaucrat who served as go-between for our company, Amutech, on this side of the hole and the Japanese

government on the other—had to travel back and forth frequently because it was the surest and safest way to do things.

But that was only a problem where hyperspace wormholes were involved. On the assumption that something with a far more limited scope—something purely within the territory of the Eldant Empire, for example—would work just fine, we had recently laid some test wire. It was great for forwarding school papers and keeping records, and best of all, it finally let us indulge students' demands to try the networking functions on systems like the 3TS.

At the moment, our "network" only really consisted of three places: this mansion, the school, and the JSDF garrison, all connected by optical fiber. We just had a server and a wireless access point in each building. That meant we'd had access to the messenger program for a while now, too, but since we all saw each other around the house, there wasn't much cause to use it.

"But I guess with me being a shut-in now and all..."

When I opened the chat window, there was just one sentence:

"How about you come out of there already?"

It was just words on the screen, but I could practically see Minori-san rolling her eyes as she typed at her keyboard.

I responded with about the shortest possible answer:

"No."

The words "Minori_K is typing" appeared and disappeared a few times, then another sentence finally showed up. I guess Minori-san had been kind enough to wait by her computer until I responded.

"Everyone's worried about you."

"Liar!" I replied, attaching a picture of a girl in a white one-piece holding a hatchet. *"I know what you'll do if I come out of this room. You'll all point and laugh at me!"*

"No, we won't."

"Then you'll all hit me! My own father never hit me!" To this I attached a picture of a certain pilot.

"What, really? Never?"

*"Hey, I was just trying to make a G*ndam reference! No fair taking it so seriously!"*

"I was never that into the original series. I was all about Wing."

Well, she was a fujoshi.

"Got smacked by my mom a few times, tho. (Also by my sister.)"

"Yeah, and by Her Majesty the first day you met. I guess there's just something really smack-able about you, Shinichi-kun."

"Smack-able!"

"Or maybe it's, like, your destiny or something."

"Feeling a lot of despair, here!"

And so on and so forth. After a bit more of this maybe-meaningful-

maybe-not chitchat, I finally concluded:

"Anyway, I'm not coming out of my room! No way, no how!"

I thought that would be the end of it, but after a moment, another sentence appeared:

"Fine, then."

Then her status icon changed to "Away."

I guess she had finally given up.

"Phew..." I closed my eyes, and felt a huge smile spread across my face. "I won!"

I mean, even I didn't really know what I had won, or how, but whatever.

"Back to work!"

I made sure I had my save point, then continued to attack the transfer-student route in my game.



Minori-sama sighed as she leaned away from her 'lap-top computer.' We had moved from the dining room into the living room, and had been trying to use the 'meszenjer' to contact Shinichi-sama, as we had discussed earlier.

"What happened?" Her Majesty demanded, leaning forward from her place on the sofa.

"Nothing happened," Minori-sama said, shaking her head. "I couldn't get him to come around."

That caused Her Majesty to sigh as well, clearly just as dispirited as Minori-sama. I thought she must also have felt some responsibility for Shinichi-sama's being shut up in his room.

"If he was going to come out just because you sent him some texts via instant messenger, I don't think things would have gotten this bad in the first place," Hikaru-sama said calmly. He seemed to have expected this outcome. He sipped his tea, looking quite fresh as he said, "I think using the messenger app is a good idea, though. Sometimes it gives you a sort of psychological cushion. Like, it can be a little easier to say what you're really thinking when you can do it through text."

"Maybe?" Minori-sama said.

"Let's not write off talking to him this way."

"These Ja-panese thingamabobs are really useful," Elvia-san said, eyeing the 'lap-top' with curiosity. She had seen and even used such a device several times, but this was the first time she had seen it used in quite this way. I suppose I wasn't one to talk: I was no more familiar with this 'instant meszenjer' than she was.

"This means we can make minimal contact at least, I guess,"

Minori-sama said, sinking into the sofa. Another sigh. "The question is what we do from here. What's the next step?"

"Yeah, it's not like there's best practices for dealing with shut-ins," Hikaru-sama said, clearly troubled.

If the two of them couldn't think of anything, then the rest of us here were as good as useless.

I was just about to heave a sigh myself when I had a thought. "Um, Hikaru-sama," I said experimentally. "The god in the story of the Heavenly Cave that you told us—did she stay in there forever?"

"Nah, they got her out of there in the end," he said with a smile. "The story goes that the other gods threw this huge party right outside the cave. They sounded like they were having so much fun that the goddess peeked out of the cave in spite of herself, and..." Hikaru-sama stopped in midsentence, as if he'd had a thought. He put one of his fingers to his chin, so delicate you could hardly believe it belonged to a man, and cocked his head. "You know, the Heavenly Cave makes a pretty good metaphor. That just might work."

"What might work?" Minister Cordobal inquired.

Hikaru-sama held up one finger. "Having a crazy good time."

"I get it," Minori-sama said. "Have so much fun out here that Shinichi-kun won't be able to help wanting to be part of it." She nodded eagerly. "Make it as lively as possible..."

"You're talkin' about a party!" Elvia-san said, holding her hand up. "Everyone drinkin' and eatin'! And eatin' and drinkin'!"

"That's how we always act at meal times, though," Minori-sama said. "And sure, there's usually drinking at parties, but we can't go giving alcohol to minors..."

"Minors? To whom do you refer?" Her Majesty looked around pointedly. Elvia-san and I both shook our heads.

"Well, Your Majesty and Myusel and Elvia are all... I get it, we're in Eldant, aren't we?" Minori-sama shrugged.

In point of fact, the age of majority in the Holy Eldant Empire was sixteen years for most purposes. So myself, Her Majesty, and Elvia-san were all adults, and by the local standards, Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama were both very much of the age of majority as well.

"In Japan, you're not allowed to drink until you're twenty," Hikaru-sama explained. "But I guess this is Eldant and there's no reason we should worry too much about that."

"It is quite possible to have a party without alcohol," Her Majesty said, standing up from the sofa. "Leave it to Garius and ourselves. We will throw a party the entire nation will—"

"I don't think we need to go that far," Minori-sama said. "If it gets *too* big, it'll defeat the point. We need to be able to wave it in Shinichi-kun's face. Ideally, we could do it in the hallway, right

outside his room.”

She was right that if the objective was to make the goings-on irresistibly fun for Shinichi-sama, there would be no purpose to holding a gathering somewhere far from his room. This mansion was on the outskirts of the capital. In the castle, we could make as much noise as we wanted, and I highly doubted it would carry this far.

“I mean, it doesn’t *have* to be in the hallway exactly,” Hikaru-sama said.

“Yeah,” Minori-sama added, “I could send him pictures of all the fun we’re having via instant messenger.” The two of them nodded at each other. “Of course, that would mean being close enough to use the wireless LAN, so we would either have to do it here in the house, or at school. Or at the garrison, I guess.”

“That narrows down the possible venues. What do we do at this party?”

Minori-sama cocked her head. “If all we do is serve food, how would it be any different from any of our dinners?”

“Let’s see, parties... Parties usually mean singing and dancing, right? Remember in the story of the Heavenly Cave, how Uzume...?”

Then Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama stared into thin air. After a long moment, once again, they both sighed.

“What?” Her Majesty said. “What is it?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“She, uh... dances. Naked,” Hikaru-sama said.

“Dances naked?” Elvia-san asked.

“Yes. This goddess, Ama-no-Uzume, does a striptease to liven things up. I guess technically she doesn’t end up *completely* naked, but, well... just about. Everyone laughs because the whole thing is so funny, and the goddess in the cave finally peeks out to see what in the world is going on. Then Ame-no-Tajikarao—uh, this very powerful god, pulls her out of the cave.”

“So what you’re sayin’ is, I just hafta take off my clothes and dance in front of Shinichi-sama’s door, right?”

Elvia-san looked like she was going to set off right then and there, but Minori-sama grabbed her hand and stopped her.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Shinichi-kun is in that room because of the trauma of being beaten to a pulp by you, Myusel, and Her Majesty. I don’t think we can know for sure what effect your striptease would have on him.”

“I don’t know, I think it’d get him out here, if nothing else,” Hikaru-sama smirked.

Elvia-san spent a moment blinking, then finally said, “So, you’re sayin’ *you* should do the dance, Minori-sama?”

“Why would I do that?!”

“Well, y’ said it can’t be me or Myusel or Her Majesty. So it just has to be someone else, right?”

“I see your logic, but no. Not biting.”

“Minister Cordobal, then?”

Minori-sama’s eyes snapped open. “That’s it!”

“Oh, please,” Hikaru-sama said. “Don’t. Then he would *really* never come out of his room again. And Minister Cordobal, don’t you look too interested in this.”

“Er... Hm.” Minister Cordobal almost appeared disappointed, I thought. Perhaps it was my imagination.

“The story of the Heavenly Cave is a metaphor, not an instruction manual,” Hikaru-sama said, crossing his arms. “All we really need is something that will pique Shinichi-san’s interest. It doesn’t have to be right in the hallway, and it doesn’t have to be naked.”

“Fair enough,” Minori-sama said. “Okay, ways to attract someone who’s deliberately acting disinterested. Sound. Or maybe... smells?”

Hikaru-sama tilted his head in thought. “But our usual dinner isn’t doing the trick. We need something special, something unmissable...”

“How about something special and *fun*?” Elvia-san piped up. “Like, you know—that meat we had at Shinichi-sama’s house!”

“Oh, the yakiniku,” Minori-sama said.

“We wish to eat yakiniku again!” Her Majesty chimed in, leaning forward.

Yakiniku: basically a simple meat dish, but unlike the food I make, it isn’t prepared in the kitchen. Rather, it’s cooked on a small grill right at the table. The flavor is provided by a sauce, and perhaps a bit of marinade, but how cooked the meat gets is at the discretion of each person at the table, so it is difficult to produce a consistent flavor. In that way, it could be considered more difficult to cook than the average meat dish. But if you can bring yourself to ignore these little details, then it’s a fun time that gives everyone control over their own food.

“Huh, yeah,” Minori-sama said thoughtfully. “Shinichi-kun’s room has a window—we don’t have to do it in the hallway.”

“Oh ho, so we are indeed going to ‘do’ yakiniku?” Her Majesty asked, eyes shining. She certainly seemed to cherish the memory of having this dish with Shinichi-sama and his family when we had visited Ja-pan. I agreed with her; it was pleasant just to recall that day. Perhaps it would be enough to tempt Shinichi-sama...

“Of course, I guess it won’t *exactly* be yakiniku,” Minori-sama said with a shrug. Then she raised a finger like a teacher instructing her students. “We have another word for it when everyone eats outside, cooking and having fun.” She grinned. “Barbecue!”



I thought I could hear voices from the front yard. They sounded awfully rowdy, obviously having fun. I had the curtains closed, but the sound still carried to where I was flopped on my bed, reading manga.

The voices were followed by something else: a smell. A good smell.

“That’s...”

By Eldant standards, this house was very solidly built, but the airtightness left something to be desired in comparison with a modern Japanese home. In particular, there was a tendency for smells from outside to get in even when the window was closed.

But *this* smell...

I sat up in bed. Now I could see there was a notification from the messenger app flashing on my computer monitor. Probably Minori-san again. She should have known by now that I had no intention of leaving this room, no matter how many times she tried to cajole me. Still, I would feel a little bad just ignoring her, so I slid off the bed and headed over to my desk.

I clicked on the icon and saw:

“*Barbecue is ON!* ☆”

I contemplated the message. I guess Minori-san was outside with the others, having a barbecue. That would explain the pleasant aroma. I didn’t bother sending a response, but Minori-san sent me a picture anyway. She must have snapped it with her smartphone. They had piled up some rocks to make a stand, put a portable grill on top of it, loaded the grill full of ingredients, and were cooking away.

Also in the picture were Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Garius, and Hikaru-san, all grinning happily as they ate grilled meat and vegetables.

Myusel was diligently arranging the food on the grill.

Petralka was happily watching it cook.

Elvia was chowing down on some meat like it was going out of style.

Garius watched over the three of them from a respectful distance. Beside him, Hikaru-san was enjoying some grilled vegetables with a pair of chopsticks.

I thought about it. It was certainly a classic barbecue scene.

The pictures kept coming, too: Loek and Romilda were there, students from my own school. I assumed Minori-san and Hikaru-san had invited them on the-more-the-merrier logic. Normally the elf and the dwarf spent all their time together fighting, but I guess the barbecue must have gotten the better of them, because they were both

enjoying the grilled meat with big smiles on their faces. God, it really was the picture of a backyard barbecue.

Another message came along with the next picture:

“We’re having a blast out here. Wanna join us?”

This picture showed Minori-san herself. She seemed to have wrangled the picture with a selfie stick. When had she gotten one of those?

I paused. On a whim, I went over to the window and peeked out from behind the curtains.

“Huh...”

I saw Myusel and Loek with their hands up for some reason. They seemed to be using some kind of magic. Maybe they were making wind to stoke the fire? No... For one thing, they were both facing my window.

Ahh.

They *were* using wind magic, but just gently, to make sure the smell of the barbecue wafted into my room. And probably to send the babbling voices along with it. They hoped I would be tempted out of my room by the smell and the spectacle.

“Hoo hoo...” A chuckle dropped from my lips. “Hoo hoo hoo hoo...” This quiet laughter was followed by a declaration: “How naïve! You badly underestimate me, Minori-san!” I pointed at the computer screen so forcefully I could almost hear the sound effect, *bishiri!* “Sheer impudence, that’s what this is!” My fingers started racing along the keyboard. “A barbecue?!” I howled. “That’s for some damn real to attend! And featuring two hot men surrounded by women, no less! I’ll bet the ladies are for dessert (lol)! You know nothing, *nothing* of the feelings of a shut-in and nasty otaku like me!”

But all I wrote was: *“Nope. Not coming.”*

And then with a satisfying *clack!*, I hit the Enter key.

I felt oddly accomplished.

“Haaa ha ha ha! I win!”

Okay, so I still wasn’t sure what I had won. I guess.

I threw myself back on my bed and resumed reading my manga.



“Barbecue” turned out to be just as fun as yakiniku, and the time passed in a flash. Before we knew it, the sky was darkening into evening. All the food we had prepared was gone. Romilda-sama had left for home with a big smile on her face, proclaiming, “I didn’t really get what it was all about, but it sure was fun. Thanks for having me!” (Incidentally, Loek-sama had said he wanted to stay a little longer to chat with Minori-sama, but Romilda-sama grabbed him by the collar

and dragged him off.)

In any event, both of them had come right over despite the suddenness of our invitation, and seemed to have enjoyed themselves tremendously. I saw them to the gate, then went back to the yard and helped Minori-sama clean up. We took down the grill, disassembled the pile of rocks we had put together, and poured water on the last of the coals, just to be safe. I piled our eating utensils on my cart so they could be taken inside later.

"I really thought this was a good idea," Minori-sama lamented as she piled utensils on the cart.

"I enjoyed m'self!" Elvia-san exclaimed.

"As did we," Her Majesty added. Both were smiling. Maybe they thought they were making Minori-sama feel better.

Hikaru-sama, though, smiled sadly. "It's great everyone had fun, but that wasn't the point."

He was right. As pleasant as the barbecue had been, we had failed in our objective, which was to get Shinichi-sama to come out of his room. Minori-sama had tried talking to him via her 'meszenjer,' and Loek-sama and I had used wind magic to direct the aroma of the food towards his room, but in the end we never saw hide nor hair of Shinichi-sama. He didn't even open the curtains on his window.

"So that's a fail for Operation Heavenly Cave," Hikaru-sama said. "What do we do next?"

Minori-sama crossed her arms and gazed up at Shinichi-sama's window. "I didn't expect Shinichi-kun to be such a fearsome opponent."

"Is he fearsome, or just stubborn?"

"I've got to be honest... I really don't know what to do next."

"Perhaps we should try that naked dance?" Hikaru-san offered.

"Yeah, I'll pass," Minori-sama said.

"Pardon me very much." Their conversation was interrupted by an unexpected speaker: Minister Cordobal. "I'm afraid we cannot stay here with you indefinitely. Her Majesty and I must return to the castle for the time being."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Minori-sama said, bowing. But Minister Cordobal shook his head with a wry smile.

"Not at all. Personally, I very much wish we could continue to enjoy your hospitality, but—"

"We do not wish to return home yet," Her Majesty said, puffing her cheeks out slightly. "Until Shinichi comes out of his room..."

"Majesty, you forget the trouble that must be addressed at the castle," Minister Cordobal said, letting a stern note enter his voice. Her Majesty seemed to be perfectly well aware of this "trouble," because she stuck out her lip petulantly, but didn't object further.

It was Hikaru-sama who asked curiously, “What kind of trouble?” Minister Cordobal’s handsome face softened a little; then, sounding as if he might let out a sigh at any moment, he said: “There is an epidemic at the castle.”

“An epidemic, sir?”

“Several of those who serve at the castle have been felled by it. This sickness has no precedent that we know of, and the medicaments of our physicians show no effect on it. We’re at a loss how to deal with it. It doesn’t kill quickly, but produces a high fever. It could be quite dangerous for children and the elderly, those without much physical stamina.”

“My goodness...” Minori-sama said. It seemed this was quite a problem in the castle town. “I’m sorry, we didn’t know. We didn’t mean to call you away at a time like that.”

“Think nothing of it,” Her Majesty replied. “Once we have ascertained the situation and given orders to deal with it, we will come again. In the meantime, we entrust Shinichi to your care.” Then she and Minister Cordobal boarded a carriage waiting just outside the gate of the mansion along with a contingent of royal guards, and they all left for the castle.



We were surrounded by enemies.

There was no way out.

We stood with our backs to each other and got ready to fight.

We were facing down several Sabre Beasts, creatures like a wolf but black as night, with eyes the color of blood. They stared us down, then opened their huge, fanged jaws and attacked.

I brought up my halberd and stabbed at one of the monsters.

Critical hit!

The creature expired with only a short yelp. They were unnatural things, man-made, and when they died they didn’t leave behind so much as a skeleton. I made sure the Sabre Beast was completely gone, then turned to the next enemy.

Or at least, I had planned to. But the next instant, the Sabre Beast came back to life.

No, that wasn’t quite it—no sooner had I killed the last one than another came up to take its place, attacking me when my attention lapsed.

I tried to counterattack, but it was too late.

I’m done for...!

Even as the thought crossed my mind, though, the new Sabre Beast died, too, the victim of a massive metal hammer that came

swinging in from the side.

Gen'ei Setsuna: "Thanks, GalGaiGar. You saved my neck."

I said gratefully. The wielder of the giant hammer was one of my party members, GalGaiGar. She was a diminutive girl; the hammer she carried was taller than she was and much, much heavier, and could dish out one-hit-kill attacks.

GalGaiGar, though, didn't answer me. She just silently went about smashing more monsters.

Behind her, the martial artist Yakiniku and the swordsman Kyouya were putting on a great show. Kyouya would get a foe's attention with a quick feint, then when he had them right where he wanted them, he would strike one swift, fatal blow. He'd be turning to the next enemy almost before I had time to be impressed, but Yakiniku launched a ball of *chi* over his shoulder, blowing the monster away before Kyouya even got to it.

Miyuu: "Setsuna-sama, let me heal you."

Gen'ei Setsuna: "Thanks."

Behind us, we diligently kept our monk-healer, Miyuu, safe. In return, she kept us in good health. My HP had dropped to almost half, but in a flash I got it all back.

If we could just get through these Sabre Beasts, we'd be almost at the boss. But every enemy we had to defeat sapped our strength.

†Obsidian Fallen Angel†: "I'm ready, everyone."

We had another protector with us, the wizard †Obsidian Fallen Angel†. We'd been warned: we scrambled to get out of the area of effect of her immensely powerful spell.

†Obsidian Fallen Angel†: "*Eternal Force Blizzard!*"

She invoked the forbidden ice magic, the most powerful of its kind. It was almost unstoppable, and there were few who could use it. Our foes were suddenly encased in ice. They died instantly.

.....

So, basically, the Sabre Beasts surrounding us were wiped out in one fell swoop. Man, Eternal Force Blizzard was something else. The kanji name of the spell alone was enough to be intimidating.

Gen'ei Setsuna: "Yes! Great work, that was a team victory. Thanks everyone."

Miyuu: "We really did it, Shinichi-sama."

The instant those words appeared on the display, I groaned.

Gen'ei Setsuna: “Buzz! Myusel!”

Miyuu: “Oh! S-Sorry...”

I could practically hear the rush of apology in the words. I looked at the screen, sighed, then grabbed the drink sitting next to my computer and took a swig. Then I went back to typing:

Gen'ei Setsuna: “No OOC talk allowed! That’s the rule in online games!”

†Obsidian Fallen Angel†: “Whatever, Shinichi-san. I know these games are about escapism, but seriously—Gen'ei Setsuna? I’ve known actual middle schoolers who didn’t have chuunibyou so bad, haha.”

Gen'ei Setsuna: “Last thing I wanna hear from a guy who looks like his idea of a wizard came from the doodles he did during math class ten years ago, Hikaru-san. †Obsidian Fallen Angel†, lolololol”

†Obsidian Fallen Angel†: “Sure you want to go down that road? Pretty sure I have the better name here.”

Kyouya: “All right, both of you, that’s enough. There is to be no arguing online.”

GalGaiGar: “We are a great brave! A king among braves!”

Gen'ei Setsuna: “Oops, that’s enough of that, GalGaiGar.”

Come to think of it, I’d lent Petralka a few DVDs last month when she’d asked me for some new recommendations. I guess she had really gotten into them, which was nice.

Yakiniku: “meat! like!”

Miyuu: “i wanted to have a japanese name. i asked minorisama for help.”

Kyouya: “This is actually the name I use when I’m doing cosplay.”

Oh yeah, Minori-san always cosplayed as a guy, didn’t she? Hence the male avatar, I guessed.

Gen'ei Setsuna: “OK, enough irl stuff! Everybody stay in character!”

We were playing the very first online game—the very first MMORPG—in the entire Eldant Empire.

I was on day fourteen of my new life as a shut-in. Minori-san messaged me every day, pretty frequently at that, and I chatted with her a little. But once everyone got the idea that I was open to “conversations” as long as they were via text, they all started pinging me.

Somehow the inert letters on the screen didn’t raise my guard quite like a face-to-face conversation, and gradually I started to answer them. Via chat, I could manage it.

I could practically picture Myusel and the other girls, hunting and pecking their way around the unfamiliar keyboard as they typed up messages in hiragana. I could tell how much time and effort it took, and my heart prickled at the thought of just ignoring them.

But even so, it still made me a little queasy to think of seeing them face-to-face. I didn't know exactly what Minori-san and Hikaru-san thought about the dribble of answers I was sending to the girls, but all of a sudden they invited me to play an online game. They had loaded some special software onto the mansion's server and set up a simple MMO.

"Don't even have to leave your room to play it," Minori-san had messaged me. True enough. I was starting to get a little tired of mainlining one gal game after another, so I decided to play along with her. You could enjoy an MMO without having to actually see anyone, and our avatars would provide a kind of buffer for dealing with the others. Some people acted so different online that you could talk about an "irl personality" and an "online persona."

So here we were. I was getting sucked into an online game for the first time in ages. Heck, MMOs were the one thing I'd had absolutely, totally no access to ever since coming here. But now that I was back on the wagon, I was finding it pretty fun.

I imposed just one condition on Minori-san and her plan: that we not talk about real-life things while we were playing. We had to completely *become* our alter egos.

Setting conditions? I know, even I sort of wanted to snap *You've got some nerve!* at myself. But Minori-san was surprisingly quick to accept the idea, and we got things rolling. Anyway, no better way to get the most out of an MMO than some good role-playing.

Kyouya (Minori-san): "Okay, the boss is up next. Everybody ready?"

As our warrior, Minori-san was on top of this. After a second, the chat balloons began popping up.

Miyuu (Myusel): "yes!"

GalGaiGar (Petralka): "any time."

Yakiniku (Elvia): "meat!"

The Eldant contingent generally wrote only in short sentences composed entirely in the simple hiragana script. Myusel and Petralka could read and even write some kanji, but it looked like they weren't entirely comfortable yet typing on a Japanese keyboard. They were probably over there somewhere, poking away at the keys with one finger at a time.

I paused. They were making this effort out of consideration for me,

and I have to admit it made me feel a little guilty. It was really my own indecision and dithering that had ultimately led to me being used as a punching bag.

“No, no, no, no, no!” I shook my head vigorously to chase away the guilt.

Right now, I had a boss fight to worry about.

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “Let’s go!”

I—or rather my avatar, Gen’ei Setsuna—headed for the 3D shadow looming on the horizon. My perspective was looking sort of downward at my character, so running beside Gen’ei Setsuna I could see Yakiniku (Elvia) and GalGaiGar (Petralka), along with Kyouya (Minori-san). I assumed that Miyuu (Myusel) and †Obsidian Fallen Angel† (Hikaru-san) were bringing up the rear.

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “Yaaaahhh!”

Gen’ei Setsuna rushed in to strike the first blow. The dragon targeted me and got ready to attack, at which point Yakiniku came barreling up, drawing aggro so Kyouya and GalGaiGar could hit the monster from both sides. The dragon lashed out with its tail and front legs. I knew those things could take a chunk out of your health even with just a glancing blow. Miyuu would try to heal us, but for the dragon, simply sweeping with its tail was essentially an area-of-effect attack, and there was no way she would be able to heal us all fast enough. These boss characters were nothing to sneeze at.

Meanwhile...

GalGaiGar (Petralka): “by our renown as a brave we shall defeat you! Go-lu-den Earth Han-mer!”

Geez, Petralka was really into this. I remembered how back when she played the lead role in our movie, she almost seemed to forget she was supposed to be an empress, and threw herself into the part. It was almost like some sort of game to her. Stress relief, if you will. Even if the movie itself did end up banned by royal decree, a chapter of her history she wished would be forgotten.

It seemed like Myusel was enjoying herself just as much as Petralka. She had deliberately taken a Japanese name, with kanji and everything. Unlike Elvia, who called herself... Yakiniku. *Yeesh*. I could just picture it: her sitting at the computer, saying, “Name? Don’t really care. Hey, how about my favorite food?”

Yakiniku (Elvia): “meat! like! so good!”

Don’t you have anything else to say?

At least you knew who you were talking to.

This boss, though. We were pounding away at it, but it had such massive HP that it just wouldn't go down. Myusel was healing left, right, and center, but the dragon's attacks did a little more damage than her spells could heal, and those of us on the front row were left to watch our health drain slowly but surely.

I wished Hikaru-san would hurry up with that spell and hopefully turn the tide. Even a powerful magic attack probably wouldn't one-hit a boss, but it might eliminate his tail or horns and take a chunk out of his attack power. But instead...

“What the hell is Hikaru-san doing back there? I mean, uh, †Obsidian Fallen Angel†?”

He was our spellcaster, so why wasn't he casting any spells? We weren't even getting buffs up here. I set my character to attack semi-automatically, then let go of the mouse and pounded out a message on my keyboard.

Gen'ei Setsuna (me): “Angel, buff? need atk or def”

There was no answer from Hikaru-san, and his avatar didn't move. Was he lagging? But how much traffic could there possibly be on a game that didn't even have ten players? What was happening?

Whatever was going on with Hikaru-san, our party was headed for a total wipe if something didn't change. I could see the dragon getting ready to unleash a spell.

Gen'ei Setsuna (me): “Tactical retreat! Use your Angel Feathers and get out of here!”

Boss characters' attacks usually had wide areas of effect, but their magic spells tended to be outright MAP weapons, if you will, vast waves of destruction that filled the screen and could easily take out an entire party at once.

I activated my item and warped out, returning to the town that served as our base. “That was a close call...” I mumbled as the scenery changed from the craggy dungeon to the innocuous little city.

Miyuu (Myusel), Yakiniku (Elvia), GalGaiGar (Petralka), and Kyouya (Minori-san) soon followed me.

“Huh?”

There was one person I didn't see. †Obsidian Fallen Angel† (Hikaru-san) didn't show up. In fact...

“Oh...”

Then †Obsidian Fallen Angel† (Hikaru-san) returned. But he was just a transparent, spirit version of himself—i.e., he had been killed. I guess he had just stayed there, not doing anything, while the dragon murdered him with its magic. He didn't come back to town by using

his item; his avatar had just reappeared at his last save point after he died.

“Arrgh...”

What was he even doing?

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “†Obsidian Fallen Angel†, what happened?”

Hikaru-san didn’t respond, not that I expected him to. He’d been talking to us just a few minutes ago, though.

Kyouya (Minori-san): “Think he got booted?”

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “But then wouldn’t it have happened to all of us?”

If there was some kind of problem with the server or the network, I would have expected all of us to be affected. We probably wouldn’t even have been able to play the game or use the chat app. So maybe it was an issue with Hikaru-san’s computer.

Yakiniku (Elvia): “wonder whabs up.”

Miyuu (Myusel): “i will go look at him. i have his key.”

Elvia had clearly made a typo, but Myusel hardly seemed to notice. She must have gotten up to check on Hikaru-san without waiting for an answer from us, because her avatar was standing stock still.

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “Something weird is going on.”

GalGaiGar (Petralka): “Mm.”

I typed the sentence, looked at the screen—and then I stopped.

.....

This was a problem. I had nothing to say.

When you couldn’t see each other, but you ran out of discussion topics, you were left not even knowing if the other person was still sitting at their screen or not. Our avatars, waiting for something to happen, didn’t move. Working the keyboard was hard enough for Petralka and the others that she couldn’t just toss in some chitchat, either.

But the thought of just sitting there, not saying a word—it was strangely... lonely.

There’s got to be something to talk about..

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “Say, GalGaiGar, is it even okay for you to be here?”

When I thought about it, I realized Petralka had been at our mansion playing this game ever since this morning. Should she really

be away from the castle for that long? Maybe she had snuck out again. I knew I was breaking my own rule about real-life topics, but I was at a loss. I would shelve the role-playing until Myusel got back.

GalGaiGar (Petralka): “we are a brave. fighting is what we do.”

Er, that was certainly true of her, uh, character, at least.

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “I mean for real. I mean you, Petralka.”

GalGaiGar (Petralka): “hm? did you not forbid talk of the real world?”

Gen’ei Setsuna (me): “Pretend I didn’t. Just for now.”

Huh. When a hiragana-only sentence got too long, it started to turn really difficult to read. I decided to throw in a few kanji, just to make life a tiny bit easier.

Me: “Are you really okay spending all your time here, Petralka? Isn’t Garius going to be angry?”

Petralka: “Garius does not have time to worry about us. there is strange plague at the castle and he is responding to it.”

Me: “Wow. What kind of plague? Geez, are you guys okay?”

Petralka: “there are no deaths yet, so we think okay.”

Elvia: “scary”

Elvia knew even less about the keyboard—or for that matter, the Japanese language—than Myusel and Petralka, so it was all she could do to offer a word here and there.

Minori-san: “Frankly, I think it’s scarier that no one has died yet.”

Me: “Stop that.”

She made it sound like we were just waiting for the real trouble to start, when people would be dropping like flies.

Me: “Seriously, what kind of illness is it?”

I was feeling pretty anxious as I typed the question. Then...

.....

.....

Me: “Petralka?”

Huh...?

I waited a moment, thinking maybe she was struggling to type out an especially long sentence, but no matter how long I waited, there was no response from her.

What happened?

Minori-san: “Hey, don’t you think Myusel’s been a while?”

Minori-san had a point. It had been a good five minutes since Myusel had left her keyboard. I would have thought that was more than enough time to go to Hikaru-san’s room and back. Had something happened? I figured that even if, say, Hikaru-san had collapsed or something, Myusel would have come rushing back to call Minori-san and Elvia. The fact that she didn’t come back at all was... strange.

Elvia: “majesty, no talk”

Yep. When you’re right, you’re right.
But what the heck was going on?

Minori-san: “I just had a thought.”

Me: “Yeah?”

Minori-san: “We’re downwind of the castle. If that sickness is airborne, maybe it could reach us here.”

Me: “Please... don’t threaten me.”

But even as I typed out the words, my mind was spinning. An infectious disease. Okay, so even most airborne pathogens couldn’t survive a trip of several kilometers. I was pretty sure I had seen a movie once where they’d explained that with an airborne illness, it wasn’t like the virus or bacteria went around flying after people. Instead, the pathogen was capable of surviving outside the body temporarily, and drifted along on the breeze for as long as it survived. If someone breathed on you while you were talking to them—or for that matter, got saliva on you—the pathogen might get around that way. It could also be in sweat. But none of those things, I figured, was going to just fly through the air forever. So it wasn’t going to spread explosively for miles around by air or anything. I thought.

But... Petralka. She had come from the castle this morning. The castle that was at the epicenter of this infection. And an infection usually has an incubation period.

“No way...”

What if Petralka, or one of her bodyguards, had been an asymptomatic carrier? And then they had come into the mansion, and...?

“No, no way. Can’t be.” I was just overthinking it. I shook my head.

Me: “Pretty sure that’s just overthinking it.”

Elvia: “yeah!”

.....

.....

.....*Huh?*

Me: “Minori-san?”

Minori-san was at least as quick a typist as I was. So why wasn't I getting any answer from her? There was no reaction at all. Her avatar, Kyouya, just stood there, still as a stone.

.....

Hey hey hey hey!

Me: “Hey, Minori-san? Don't scare me like this. What's going on?”

I typed as fast as I could, but there was still no answer. *Hang on, could something seriously be wrong?*

Elvia: “what's wrong minori-sama”

That was what I wanted to know!

Elvia: “everyone not come back why?”

Me: “No idea. Can you tell what's going on, Elvia?”

Elvia: “nob know”

Her response seemed a little off. Maybe a sign of how uneasy she was. What in the world was happening?

..... *Wait.*

I furrowed my brow as a possibility occurred to me. For the last two weeks, I had been shut up in my room. Hadn't opened the doors or windows, hadn't had physical contact with anybody. Including Petralka, of course. But what about the others? Say for the sake of argument that Petralka, or maybe Garius or one of the royal guards, was a carrier of the disease. Could the infection have spread while everyone was together in the house? Petralka and Garius, in particular, shared meals, had tea, and participated in other social niceties with the rest of the household, or so I had heard. Maybe the infection could have spread... then...?

The members of the household had dropped out of the game in the order: Hikaru-san, Myusel, Minori-san. Elvia and I were the only ones left. Was everyone (excluding me, having never left my room) succumbing in order from weakest to strongest?

Hikaru-san was a guy, but he was awfully slight (helped with his cosplaying, at least), and didn't come across as the hardy type. Myusel, on the other hand, was surprisingly tough: she used a lot of energy doing housework, and had even been in the military for a while.

All that led to just one conclusion...

Me: “Elvia, you okay?”

I was starting to feel really uneasy.

Elvia: “Yes. hTT”

Me: “Elvia?”

What kind of response was that? And a moment later:

Elvia: “mi oky”

Her messages were hardly even making sense anymore. I knew she was prone to typos, but this...

Elvia: “okk”

She seemed to be trying to type *I’m okay*, but she kept sending it when she was only halfway through. I waited for what I hoped would be a complete, coherent sentence, but nothing showed up.

Me: “Elvia...?”

There was no answer.

Me: “?”

I tried sending this one, lone symbol, but nobody responded. Everyone’s avatars just stood there, looking weirdly almost lifelike the way they breathed in and out as they waited. It was like they were in some strange place between alive and not alive, and I found it unsettling.

Could this really be...?

Just as I was starting to seriously worry, another message from Elvia popped up.

Elvia: “Itchy. Tasty.”

And that really was the last thing I got out of her.

I could only stare stupidly at the screen. All the avatars were there, but they might as well have been empty husks.

“I can’t believe it...”

Had the epidemic spread to our mansion? Had every single other person caught it and collapsed? And if they had... this was, like, really serious, wasn’t it? I didn’t know exactly what disease we were dealing with, but I did know this was a different world. I had no idea what kind of bizarre, terrifying illnesses might be lurking here. What if this was an emergency, something that was deadly if not treated immediately?

This is bad. This is so bad.

I jumped up from my chair and headed straight for the door. I already had a hand on it when I froze.

The whole reason I was still healthy was because I hadn't taken a single step outside my room. So if I went through this door, what then? Whatever this bug was, it was so infectious that everyone else in the house had caught it. I might catch it, too. From a safety standpoint, maybe it was best for me to stay shut up in here.

"But..."

Could I really live with myself if I didn't do anything? If I just abandoned everybody? Maybe they were all down with fevers. Maybe they were in pain. Maybe they were suffering.

Myusel. Petralka. Elvia. Minori-san. Hikaru-san.

Out of concern for me, locked away in my room, they had tried everything to get me outside—holding a barbecue, even setting up a special MMO just for us. Myusel had dutifully brought me my meals every day, even though I never opened the door. Petralka could be prickly sometimes, but she could also be as innocent and lovely as a child. And Elvia—she could go a little over-the-top sometimes, but I found her generous spirit really comforting.

There was Minori-san, who, at the end of the day, was dedicated to keeping me safe. And I couldn't forget...

"....."

Uhhh.

Well.

I liked Hikaru-san's..... I liked Hikaru-san. Pretty much. I guess.

In any event, images of each of their smiling faces flashed through my mind (yes, including Hikaru-san's taunting grin). It tore me up inside to think they might be suffering. It hurt so bad.

"Brace yourself, Kanou Shinichi," I told myself, and clenched my fists. *You're the only one who can help them. The only one who can save them. If you abandon them to this plague, you'll be forever doomed to know you're a coward, a weakling, a yellow-bellied, lily-livered scaredy-cat!*

.....

"Pfft, yeah, right," I mumbled, even as I put my hand on the doorknob. The whole fired-up-hero thing didn't really work for me. "If nothing else... I can stay in here, but I guess Myusel won't be around to bring me my food. I'd just starve to death."

So I could come out now, or I could come out days from now. And if I waited until I was weak with hunger, it would be too late. I had to move while I still had the energy and the stamina. If I acted now, there might be something I could do for the girls (plus Hikaru-san).

I steeled myself, opened the door, and walked out into the hallway.



Outside my room, it was dead silent.

Our mansion was a pretty big place. So big that even with all of us in there, there were still plenty of rooms we didn't use. My family's house in Japan was a four-bedroom home, and it probably would have fit in here several times over.

As big as this place was, though, it never felt oppressively quiet. There were always people around, and if you listened closely enough, you could almost always hear someone in another room. It felt very lived-in. Even when I snuck to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I knew there were people there.

But now... Now, I couldn't sense anyone at all from the hallway. It was like walking through an abandoned building. It wasn't dark—there were electric lights and a few lamps for good measure—but it was unnaturally quiet, and I thought I felt a chill.

I'd never been in a house quite like this before. I swallowed in spite of myself. Come to think of it, it had been quite a while since I'd left my room for anything except a midnight bath.

Look to the right. Look to the left. Then I closed the door behind me, deciding to go to Hikaru-san's room. He was the first to drop out of contact, and his room was right next to mine—both good reasons to start there, but the truth is, I really picked it because Myusel was there.

Myusel carried the spare keys for each of our rooms. As long as Hikaru-san hadn't locked his door from the inside (like I had done while I was being a shut-in), Myusel wouldn't have had any trouble getting in. If they'd both collapsed from illness, at least his door ought to be open. And if I could actually join forces with Myusel, we would be able to get into the other rooms.

The thoughts raced through my head. For some reason, it scared me not to have sound logic for whatever I was doing. Otherwise, I was afraid I would make a wrong move, and end up looking back and wishing I had done something differently. Of course, if I was so worried about regret, I suppose one could suggest that I shouldn't have shut myself up in my room to begin with.

But anyway...

As I walked along, I found myself trying not to breathe. In this too-quiet house, the sound of my own breath seemed weirdly loud. And if there were an airborne pathogen hanging around, it might be best not to breathe too deep, or anyway, so I thought.



Just to be safe, I held a tissue that I had grabbed from my room over my mouth. I seemed to remember that tissues had first been mass-produced during World War I, to be used as filters in gas masks, but that after the war they were turned into a general consumer item. I also seemed to recall, though, that it was questionable how much they actually kept viruses or bacteria from getting into your mouth.

Before long, I was standing in front of Hikaru-san's room. The door was open, sure enough, but only slightly ajar. It wasn't locked.

I decided to see if anyone was in there before I burst in. "Myusel? Hikaru-san?" But there was no response.

I got up my nerve and put a hand on the door. That hesitation I felt must have come from the fear. What if I opened the door and discovered the worst? But when I really thought about it, I wasn't even sure what "the worst" would be. If Myusel and Hikaru-san really were out cold in there, I would be glad I had found them sooner rather than later. But they wouldn't have both just dropped dead... I didn't think.

Right?

After a lengthy pause, I nudged open the door and peeked inside. "Wha...?"

The room was... empty.

Not empty of stuff, I mean. The closet was still full, and the sewing machine, bed, and desk were all still there. Hikaru-san's laptop, which had put itself into sleep mode, was open on the desk, and a half-drunk cup of tea sat beside it, but Hikaru-san himself was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Myusel, who had supposedly come in here.

Had Hikaru-san had to leave his room urgently for some reason? And then maybe Myusel had shown up, discovered he wasn't there, and went off looking for him?

"But what on earth could have...?" I mumbled, scanning the room once more, just to be extra sure Hikaru-san and Myusel weren't hiding in the wardrobe or under the desk or something. Then I went back to the hall.

Next up, Myusel's room. That was downstairs. The creaking of the staircase didn't usually bother me, but now it seemed portentous and eerie, and once I was downstairs I hurried to Myusel's room as quickly as I could. Maybe she had brought Hikaru-san there to give him first aid. And then maybe she had started to feel ill herself and collapsed.

When I got to Myusel's door, it was the same thing: cracked open, a little space between the door and the wall.

"Myusel!" Gripped by a wave of foreboding, I bounded into Myusel's room without a second thought. But...

"Huh?"

There was nobody there. Again.

On the desk, there were two laptops, power still on.

Huh? Two laptops? Why two of them?

Then it hit me: the other one was for Petralka to use. A glance at the screens confirmed my suspicions. The computer on the left showed a window centered on the avatar GalGaiGar, while the computer on the right was centered on Miyuu.

Petralka didn't have a room of her own in our mansion. She must have settled in her friend Myusel's room to play the game. But... that meant Petralka was gone, too. In fact, I didn't even see any trace of the royal guards, who were supposed to stay close to her at all times. They weren't usually in the same room, but they would always be somewhere they could show up in an instant—like the hallway outside, say.

“What's going on...?”

Seriously, what was this?

I could feel my mind starting to go to some dark places. “Stay calm, Kanou Shinichi!” I urged myself before the gloom could get a grip on me, and headed for the next room. That would be Elvia's. I went down the hallway, up the stairs, and arrived at her room, running all the way. There was no time for a nice, calm walk anymore.

“Elvia! Are you there?!” I shouted, even as I pushed on the door. But this room was still locked, and the door didn't budge. I pounded on it, but there was no answer from inside. I pressed my ear to the door, straining to hear even the smallest sound, but there was nothing. I didn't even get the sense that there was anyone in there. “Elvia...”

The last message she had sent flashed through my mind.

Elvia: “Itchy. Tasty.”

No. It couldn't be.

The mysterious words. The meaningless adjectives.

It was almost like she had lost her mind. Like her rational faculties had abandoned her. It was eerily similar—in fact identical—to a diary entry from a certain horror game, an entry penned by someone writing his last words as a terrifying virus turned him into a slaving monster.

An illness of unknown origin. Here in another world. Meaning...

“Grr...!”

With the door locked, I had no way to see what was inside. I wouldn't learn anything new just standing here. I turned to strike out for the last room—Minori-san's. Immediately after which...

“Eeyikes?!”

Everything around me went dark, and I stumbled to the ground in a heap. Luckily, I was able to curl up so I didn't hit anything too

vulnerable too hard, but with no light to see by, I couldn't be sure I wasn't injured. There were still lamps burning in the hallway, but they didn't give nearly enough light to chase away the darkness that had settled over the mansion.

Electricity for the house was provided by the solar- and wind-power generators over by the school, along with a large battery. Did that mean the power line from there to here had been cut? But why so suddenly? And would it really be so easy to cut a power line that only went directly from point A to point B?

"Hrk..." I stood up, feeling a dull pain in a few places around my body. In Japan, street lamps and twenty-four-hour convenience stores gave most places a healthy glow even in the middle of the night, but here in Eldant, the night darkness was of a different magnitude. The light of the lamps was just a flicker against it, not even enough to tell exactly what was going on around you. Although it would at least enable you to walk once your eyes adjusted.

I reached into my pocket, thinking I could use the flashlight on my phone. But I guess in my rush, I had left my phone in my room. No choice. I would just have to walk very carefully.

I was still completely befuddled about what could be happening. I decided to start by trying to get to the storage shed where we kept the emergency lights and flashlights. Even if I went to Minori-san's room right now, I wouldn't be able to see anything.

The human body is a mysterious thing: when you no longer have your vision to rely on, your hearing becomes startlingly acute. I could hear my own breathing, my footsteps, my clothing rustling as I walked. Every sound seemed inordinately loud to me. Maybe it was the fear that made my mouth feel so dry with every breath. I found myself panting, like an animal. My heart seemed to be going way faster than necessary, and I wished it would slow down.

"Wait..."

I detected a noise, but I wasn't the one who had made it. I stopped and listened. It sounded like... footsteps. But it wasn't. It was just a scraping, like the sound of a hard-soled shoe against wooden floorboards. It was accompanied by a creaking noise, and even what sounded like something soft being dragged along.

What was this?

What was this what was this what was this?!

My bad feeling got a lot worse. The sound rounded the corner of the hallway and started coming toward me. Something was approaching in the dark. A shape so huge it nearly filled the hallway, shambling slowly toward me.

"Heek...?!"

I have to run.

I had the thought, but my body was rooted to the spot and refused to move.

Everyone was gone. The lights were out. And a dark shadow was dragging something toward me through the murk.

What is going on in this mansion?

What had happened out here while I was shut away in my room? Was this really all because of that epidemic? Or... was this the true face of the illness? This was an entirely separate world. A fantasy land of magic and elves and dragons. Why should I expect a sickness here to look anything like anything I was used to in Japan? Diseases here might be completely different.

They might turn you into a monster, for example. Or they might cause your desiccated corpse to wander around after you were gone.

“Oh... God...”

Magic, I thought desperately. I raised my right hand, but I was shaking so hard I could barely say the words. It was probably for the best. I was trapped in an enclosed space; busting out Tifu Murotsu here would probably take me down along with whatever that thing was.

At last the dark shape emerged into the lamplight, revealing itself. It had to be less than three meters away...!

“Yaaaaaargh!” Instead of a spell, I let out a scream.

Crap, I’m gonna die!

“Oh, hullo, Master. Come out of your room?”

“Aaaaahh—huh?”

I blinked at the familiar voice. Then I took another, closer look at what was standing there in the hazy light of the lamp. It was a bipedal creature covered in scales. To a modern Japanese, it—no, he—probably looked like the very picture of an inhuman monster, but he could use tools and even speak. He was very much considered a person in this world. He was a lizardman.

“Brooke...?”

“Yessir.”

“And Cerise-san...”

“Yes, sir.”

Standing in front of me were the lizardman couple that lived in this house: Brooke, the gardener, and his wife Cerise-san, who was now one of our maids. I knew them perfectly well, but when they walked together, their shadows melded into each other and looked like some other, even bigger and more terrifying beast.

“G-Geez, wow...” I felt myself go weak, and finally just sat down right there on the floor.

That’s right. There were two residents of this mansion I hadn’t been accounting for. Our lizardmen didn’t live in the main house—it

was more convenient for them to stay in a separate building—so I very rarely saw them around the mansion after dinner, let alone in the middle of the night. And they didn't use computers, so I hadn't spoken a word to them for two entire weeks. I had practically forgotten about them.

"Are you all right, sir?" Cerise-san said, reaching out to help me up.

"Thanks..." I took her hand and stood unsteadily. That was when I spotted Cerise-san's tail, a distinctive feature of lizardman physiology, behind her. That would explain the dragging noise I'd heard. Plus, the two normally went around barefoot, which was why I hadn't heard any shoes.

I tried to consciously slow my heart, still pounding with the lingering adrenaline, but I had never been so relieved to run into some friendly faces.

"W-Wait," I said, "you two are okay?!"

"Sir...?" Cerise-san said.

"Shouldn't we be?" Brooke asked.

The two of them weren't very expressive, but by the tone of their voices and the way their tongues slid in and out of their mouths, I could take a good guess at how they were feeling. Right now, they seemed to be surprised.

"I mean... the sickness... Everyone else..."

They had all collapsed and disappeared. I thought...

"Sickness, sir?" Brooke said. He looked at his wife.

"You know, I did hear something about an outbreak in the vicinity of the castle," she said. Apparently they were both feeling perfectly normal. I guess whatever this thing was, it didn't affect lizardmen. Or maybe...

"Hang on... Wait a second," I said, almost to myself.

Had everyone *really* collapsed from illness? Even if they had all been infected, would they really all succumb at the same time, in the same way, in less than an hour? And with no warning at all?

Obviously, I had only seen Myusel and the others online, via their avatars, so it was always possible the illness had been steadily progressing as we played. But... would they really be playing a video game if they felt that bad? My head was spinning.

That was when Brooke said: "By the by, Master, all the others seem to be gathered in the yard. Is something the matter?"

"Excuse me?"

Ex-cuse me?



“Yard” is such a small word, but the one at our mansion was pretty darn big. Just about anything a building wasn’t actively standing on could be considered a yard, so by sheer land area, there was more “yard” than house around here. Some parts of it had neat, geometrical arrangements of flower plots or fountain ponds, but get far enough out and it became hard to tell the so-called yard from the forest beyond. Thanks to Brooke’s consistent hard work, at least it never got to looking like an abandoned lot or anything.

Now I was behind the house, on the other side from the main gate and entryway. There was a bush, about waist-high... and from behind it came the faint glow of an electric light.

I got a little closer: it was the monitor of a laptop computer. A tarp had been laid on the ground, under the computer; and I could see several shadows surrounding the machine. It was Myusel, Petralka, Elvia, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san. Not far off, I spotted the royal guard, too.

And...

“See, Shinichi-kun went to your room first, right, Hikaru-kun?”

Minori-san pressed a button on the laptop. Just like she said, the screen showed me leaving my room and heading for Hikaru-san’s. She was obviously playing back a recording from one of the mansion’s cameras.

“So this indicates that Shinichi considers Hikaru most important of all to him...?”

“I *don’t* think so,” Minori-san said with a smile. “He was going to where Myusel was. He knew she’d gone to Hikaru-kun’s room. If he’d thought she was in her own room, I guarantee he would’ve gone there first.”

“Hrm,” Petralka grumbled.

“Soooo,” Minori-san said, turning to Myusel and grinning. I’d never seen her so happy about anything that wasn’t BL. “I’m thinking you really are the most important to Shinichi-kun, Myusel.”

“G-Gosh, I wonder...” Myusel turned red and put her hands to her cheeks.

Wow, what’s with the adorable gesture?! Some kind of special move—is that what this is? Does everyone who sees it die (of moe)?!

.....Er, nope. Never mind.

“I disagree,” Hikaru-san said. “Shinichi-san was just going in the order we disappeared. After all, he couldn’t be *sure* Myusel would be in my room, right?”

“Yes, that is indeed the case!” Petralka exclaimed, clenching her fist. “Behold the face of Shinichi when he enters Myusel’s room and discovers we are not there. His expression at that moment reveals precisely whom he cares for the most!”

“If ya really believe that, then get a look at his face when he pounds on *my* door! He’s totally freaked! Way worse than for any of the rest of ya!” Elvia practically squirmed with happiness.

“I don’t know, I really think he was looking for Myusel first... Ah.” That was when Minori-san turned toward me. Being the accomplished martial artist she was, maybe she could sense that I was there.

“...Well, well.” She gave me a lopsided grin.

That prompted Myusel and the others to look my way, too.

“Shinichi!” Petralka was the first to speak. Followed by—

“Amazin’! It’s just like Minori-sama and Hikaru-sama said!” Elvia’s tail wagged.

“Shinichi-sama...” Myusel was the last to speak, her voice a whisper of wonder. Naturally, all of them—all three girls, plus the amused Minori-san and Hikaru-san—looked in perfectly good health, no sign of illness anywhere. Which meant...

“You’re awful, all of you!” I shouted, my clenched fists trembling. “You *tricked* me?!”

And here I had been so worried about them! All of them! I had been wracked with anxiety about what was going on! And the whole thing, all of it, had been made up!

“You even killed the power and everything! What did you think you were going to get out of it?!”

“We just figured that if a push didn’t work, we’d try a pull,” Minori-san said with a shrug. “If you wouldn’t come out for something fun, we thought maybe you’d come out for something scary.”

“That was crazy! How could you lie to me like that?!”

“Nobody lied. There *is* an epidemic near the castle, that much is true. And then we each just stopped playing the game and came out into the yard. Right, Hikaru-kun?”

“Sure is!” he said. I could practically imagine him giggling like a schoolgirl chatting with her BFF. But they couldn’t get rid of me that easily.

“That’s just semantics!”

I mean, *strictly speaking*, what Minori-san said was true. They hadn’t deliberately lied to me. But the way they had each gone silent and left the game one after another, the way they mentioned the epidemic right when it would most fan the flames of my worry, and then going so far as to cause a power outage—it was obviously all a ploy to scare the crap out of me!

“And then there was that *Itchy. Tasty.* chat message from Elvia!”

“That was just to help set the mood,” Hikaru-san said.

“You did that, Hikaru-san?!”

“Yeah, although I admit I was a little worried it’d tip you off that we were just playing with you.”

“Grrrrrrr!”

“Still not a lie,” Hikaru-san said, pointedly looking away from me. Wow, it was really adorable the way he—no, no!

“Don’t act all cute with me!” This was bad enough already. I wasn’t so much upset about being tricked; I just wanted to die from embarrassment at the thought that everyone had been watching me the whole time I rushed all over the house in complete terror. I was sure they’d seen me screaming like a little girl when I thought Brooke and Cerise were a monster, too.

And to *record* the whole thing!

I glanced in the direction of the royal guard, but they collectively refused to look at me. Clearly, I was too pitiful for them to even bear to see me.

Ahh!!

Gah! If there was a hole here, I would have dreaded-spinning-drill-jumped right into it!

“U-Uh, Shinichi-sama...” Myusel said hesitantly. “I—I really wanted to... to apologize to you, Shinichi-sama. So I wished... you would... come out of your room...”

“Myusel, you are one dedicated girl,” Minori-san said with a laugh.

“Again...” I whispered, my eyes on the ground.

“What...?” Myusel looked at me, perplexed; Petralka and Elvia glanced at each other; while Minori-san and Hikaru-san regarded me skeptically. I turned my back on them all... and set off running as fast as a frightened rabbit.

"I'll shut myself in agaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiinn!"

“Oh, Shinichi-sama...!”

I ignored Myusel, making a beeline for my room. I didn't have it in me to stay in that spot one moment longer.

A while later. After less than half an hour, the mansion's power came back on, which meant I had my computer back. My messenger was full of apologies from the others, but I didn't see them until the next morning. I had pulled the covers over my head and gone to sleep.



And so we came to the next day. Through the chat Petralka and Garius, back for another visit, gave me the details on this epidemic. Sufferers experienced a high fever and a feeling of lethargy, while some also presented with runny noses, coughs, headaches, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea—the list went on. Eldant had its own endemic diseases, but none of their medicines seemed to work very well on this current outbreak. Garius and the others didn't know what to do.

The solution, finally, came from an unexpected source: the JSDF garrison. The base's doctor evaluated several people who had the illness, and discovered what it really was: influenza.

The influenza virus, it turned out, hadn't existed in Eldant. I.e., most people had no immunity, and there were no medicines to combat it. It was as simple as that: the bug had never existed in this world, and we had brought it with us from Japan.

Here I thought they had tested the hell out of us to make sure we wouldn't bring any unknown viruses back from the other world, but I guess they hadn't tested us enough after all. I didn't know who the carrier had been, but Matoba-san made more back-and-forth journeys than any of us, and there was a good chance it was him.

It wouldn't be the first time this sort of thing had happened in history. But things moved quickly after that. The JSDF requisitioned and distributed medicine from Japan, as well as flu vaccines for all of us and anyone else who wanted one. Everyone seemed to think the furor about the epidemic would die down before long.

And then...

"Morning..."

I came into the dining area, scratching my cheek in embarrassment. Everyone else was already there; I was the last to arrive.

Despite my declaration that I was going to go back to being a shut-in, I had eventually given up on it. I assumed Minori-san and Hikaru-san would continue to try everything they could think of to get me out of my room, and I wouldn't have put it past them to finally resort to violent force, like my parents had done. Frankly, I was afraid they might invent some even more humiliating plan. And I didn't think I could endure any more humiliation.

So, farewell, shut-in life! It was good while it lasted. Lounging around in bed, reading whatever manga I wanted, playing games when I got tired of that, having delicious food brought right to my door.

But now...

"Um..." Myusel interrupted serving and rushed over to me—but then her shyness seemed to catch up with her, and she looked at the ground. "G-Good morning, Sh-Shinichi-sama." She sounded like she could hardly get the words out.

"Yeah, morning..."

"Your food... It's ready, so..."

"Yeah. Let's eat. Together."

"...Yes, sir!"

The shut-in life was a fun time; I'm not gonna lie. But I have to admit, too, that meals do taste better when you share them with

someone. And they taste even better than that when they're also made by a girl like Myusel.

And so...

"Itadakimasu!" I was grateful, but not just for the food on my plate. I looked at Myusel, sitting across from me—I was grateful for her, too.

Chapter Two
Chirudoren?



Chapter 2: Chirudoren?

You can talk about “otaku stuff,” but that term covers a wide range. Manga. DVDs. Games. Light novels. You could think of “story” as a huge tree that branches out into things like character goods. There’s a lot of diversity.

Then you’ve got figures of specific characters, or maybe image songs, body pillows, and on and on. Or there might be products representing tools and gadgets from the story world. When it comes to super popular series, there might even be tie-in food items and sweets, or stationery—you know, really working that synergy. And then sometimes branches of the main series spawn their own manga or DVDs or light novels or games. Read: spinoffs.

Anyway.

The field of otaku goods is so vast as to defy total categorization, and the mere thought of collecting everything out there is enough to make a person feel faint. Let alone the thought of having to have it all shipped over to you at regular intervals... Imagine the tower of boxes, the fleet of massive trucks it would demand, the dizzying amount of packing material. It would all take up a lot of room.

And now imagine the shipments cover three people.

When I found myself staring down the delivery of cardboard boxes, I honestly got a bit dizzy.

“Seems even more... staggering than usual today,” I mumbled as I took in the wall of boxes standing just outside our front door. About half were filled with brand-new manga, novels, anime, DVDs, and games, while the other half contained “related merchandise.”

All of it supplied and paid for by the Japanese government.

It had made its way to us here in the Eldant Empire through a hyperspace wormhole. Normally it was addressed to the JSDF garrison on the edge of the Eldant capital of Marinos. Trans-hyperspace wormhole delivery wasn’t just used to get anime stuff to needy otaku; supplies for the JSDF and personal items for the members of the garrison came, too. For that reason, we often went by bird-drawn carriage to pick up our deliveries at the garrison, but sometimes soldiers would drop things off at the mansion if they were in the area on other business. Today, that’s what had happened. Not to mention, all this stuff would never have fit in one carriage.

“Why is there so much stuff?” I asked aloud. I was the one who had placed the order, but this was clearly an unusual amount of

deliveries. Or had someone else included a bunch of requests that made the pile this big?

“Probably because Summer Co**ket just wrapped up.” This calm assessment came from another employee of Amutech—and another of the three people responsible for this order—Ayasaki Hikaru-san.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “And WonFes was just recently, too.”

“We cut down on the number of genres we wanted them to check out, but there have been so many new groups making goods recently,” Hikaru-san said.

And so it was: we had ordered doujinshi and the like as well as all the official stuff, but of course it was impossible to order one copy of every doujinshi at “*NatsuKomi*”—Summer **miket. Instead, we had asked them to canvass only specific genres—but just like Hikaru-san said, there were lots of groups out there, and more every day. Not just making books, either, but shopping bags, body pillows, and more. Books, being all roughly of a similar size and shape, were easy to pack into cardboard boxes, but a lot of merchandise was less intuitive to ship.

And then there was WonFes (“Wonder Fe**ival”), a huge event all about plastic models and garage kits, held at almost the same time as Comi**t. Most of what came out of that show was statuettes and models, things that ate up a lot of space. But a lot of those figures and gadgets I mentioned could only be found at WonFes, so we had asked for a few of them to be sent over.

And I guess everything had arrived at once.

“Don’t tell me you don’t even remember what you ordered,” Hikaru-san said.

“I do! Vaguely. But it’s not like I ordered it all at once. Some of it was probably a while ago...”

C*mik*t and WonFes weren’t held quite simultaneously, after all, and it would take time to go to them and check everything out. The only way to be sure what the different groups had there was to get on the internet and look up the details, but because there was no network connection between Japan and Eldant, I even had *that* sort of thing shipped to me periodically on a hard disk. It meant a lengthy time lag before I got caught up on anything.

Then of course, there were times when release dates slipped (and not just for doujinshi; it could happen to anything), which of course meant it got to us even later. Say it had been six months since I requested something; of course I wasn’t going to remember what it was.

“Anyway, we’ve got to get this stuff inside.” I turned to the maid beside me. “Myusel, sorry to trouble you, but...”

This maid was a half-elf. The pointy ears were the proof. She

handled whatever domestic tasks needed to be done in the household, and she had come out here to help with the cargo, but... honestly, I wasn't sure about making this frail-looking young woman carry around these bulging boxes. Maybe if we stumbled across one with figures in it, it would at least be a little lighter than a box full of books.

"It's fine." Myusel smiled, looking completely at ease. *Ahh, what a fine girl. A fine young woman y' are, Myusel...*

As my thoughts suddenly and inexplicably took on the twang of an old Osakan dude, I realized that the muscliest Japanese person among us wasn't here.

"Hey, where's Minori-san?" That was, Koganuma Minori-san, officer of the JSDF. She might have been a woman, but to be perfectly honest, she was way stronger and more physically capable than I was. "I'm sure a lot of this stuff is her BL."

"Oh, Minori-san said she was going to go get Brooke and Cerise-san to come help. She thought there might be a lot of cargo today."

"Ah..."

Well, there was. Even with Myusel to help, it would take an awfully long time to move it all inside. Minori-san had obviously come to the same conclusion when she had seen "the wall."

"Elvia said she'd be by later, too... Oh, speak of the devil." Hikaru-san pointed toward the house.

I looked back and saw Minori-san emerging from the open door, along with our lizardman gardener Brooke Darwin.

"Is it all here?" Minori-san asked, jogging up to us. She had a huge smile on her face. Without waiting for an answer, she tore open one of the boxes tagged on the side with a marker pen and started inspecting the contents. I thought she might burst into a happy "runtatta~ ♪" at any moment. She was practically floating.

"Minori-san, hang on..."

I guess she was really looking forward to something in one of these boxes. I acted a little chagrined, but the truth is, I understood how she felt. Any otaku, regardless of interests or preferences, wants to see their stuff when it arrives. If you aren't eager to see it, are you even really an otaku?

But some of the stuff I had ordered was stuff I would rather the girls not see—which is to say, stuff I would be embarrassed for them to see—which is to say, stuff I might very well be torn limb from limb for if they saw. So I didn't necessarily want to just pop open all the boxes right in front of everybody. I had to think Minori-san was in the same situation—I assumed it was some BL doujinshi she was looking for—but she didn't seem to have my qualms. Then again, I was a lot less worried about the BL books themselves than about the

unquenchable fire of Minori-san's passion for them.

"These'ns belong to you, Master?" Brooke asked, shuffling toward the wall of boxes.

"Er, yeah, thank you," I said. "From here to here. They've all got my mark on the side. Could you bring them to my room?"

"Yessir," Brooke nodded.

"My mark," by the way, was an icon Hikaru-san had designed, something to help the Japanese residents of the mansion keep each other's possessions separate. It was nice and simple, sort of like the face of some SD character. It was so easy that even I, with my minimal artistic talent, could draw it, and above all, it was cute.

Myusel could actually read a pretty good number of kanji, and even Elvia and Brooke had picked up a fair amount just by being around, but Cerise, who was the last of the mansion's occupants to have taken up residence here, didn't know a word of Japanese, and even Brooke and Elvia had to study a kanji for a moment before they could figure it out. So we had created icons that were immediately distinguishable.

"Hey, is it just you, Brooke?" I asked. The lizardman was hefting a box from beside the grinning Minori-san. Hadn't Hikaru-san said Minori-san was going to get Brooke *and* Cerise?

"This's physical labor," Brooke said around the box. "I'll do enough for the both of us."

Huh! Very manly. Lizard... manly.

As I've mentioned, Brooke and his wife Cerise were lizardmen, a reptile-like race. Brooke was our gardener, and Cerise worked as a maid in the mansion. They didn't act all lovey-dovey in public, but moments like this showed exactly how much they cared for each other. Honestly, it was kind of heartwarming.

"Okay, cool. Myusel, could I ask you to take... let's see. How about this little box?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's still pretty heavy, be careful."

With some of the portering successfully delegated, I grabbed another box with some of my stuff in it—

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

—and then practically dropped it when Minori-san uttered a piercing, shattering cry of joy. I scrambled to catch my box, then looked over to discover her madly unpacking some exceptionally carefully packaged item. She unfurled a puffy sheet of bubble wrap to reveal... a boxed soccer ball.

"What's that, Minori-san?"

"It's a ball signed by one of the voice actors from *Prince of Soccer*! I've been waiting for this forever!"

Prince of Soccer—wasn't that, you know, that anime about those boys who played soccer? I'd heard it was wildly popular with girls these days. Allegedly these guys could warp time and space with their kicks, cause entire stadiums to crack in half when they scored a goal, and float through the air on top of a soccer ball. For the life of me, I couldn't picture it.

But in any event, Minori-san looked overjoyed, clutching the ball to her chest.

"Is that, like, a limited edition or something?"

"It's a *prize*! Only three people in the entire world have one! I can't believe I'm one of them!" She looked like a kid with a new number-one possession, her eyes sparkling behind her glasses. I guess she was really happy about winning this autographed soccer ball. You know, I seemed to remember her being thrilled about another limited-edition ball from *Prince of Soccer*. A gold one. Or... at least gold-colored. I also seemed to remember Elvia being even crazier about it than Minori-san.

"This time I'm gonna hide this thing so well Elvia will never find it!" Minori-san said to herself.

"Elvia? What about her?" Hikaru-san said, looking perplexed. Come to think of it, I guess he hadn't been here for that little episode.

"The last time I got a limited-edition ball from *Prince of Soccer*, Elvia decided it was her new favorite toy."

Elvia had a special weakness for round objects—maybe it was a werewolf thing. And if it was yellow or gold, so much the better. So when she'd seen that soccer ball, she'd pounced on it like a dog with a toy.

"Ahh, I get it..." Hikaru-san smiled. His face showed a mixture of emotions, but he seemed to completely believe that sort of thing could have happened.

On the one hand, it was easy to picture how cute Elvia must have been playing happily with that ball—but as an otaku, he understood how it must hurt to watch your precious new limited-edition ball rolling through the dirt. I had heard of some especially dedicated people who even put on gloves when touching their limited-edition items. It was as if they were precious art exhibits or antiques. And for the people who owned them, maybe they *were* just that valuable.

"Man, that takes me back," I said, closing my eyes. "That whole soccer tournament! Although I guess it did get pretty crazy in the end."

We'd had teams with elves, dwarves, human knights, lizardmen, and even the JSDF, all participating in a soccer tournament together. This was not long after we had arrived in Eldant, which is to say immediately after the little incident between me and the Japanese

government. We needed a nice event to smooth everything over.

I don't know why I had expected soccer here to be anything like it was in Japan, though. In the end, magic came into play, along with all the varying physical abilities of the different groups, until the whole thing was as crazy as anything on *Prince of Soccer*. It was enough to make you wonder if it was really soccer anymore, but one thing it unquestionably was was fun, and the Eldant people all seemed to enjoy it, too. The only thing as extensive as the enjoyment had been the property damage, though, so we hadn't held another tournament since then.

"That was when Cerise and Brooke got back together," I said fondly.

"Back together?" Hikaru-san echoed. "Wait... They were apart?"

The soccer tournament would have been described in the papers Hikaru-san had read before coming here, but the reports probably wouldn't have included a description of the rapprochement between two lizardmen. It wasn't exactly the sort of thing you put in a white paper.

"Some... things happened," I explained, "and their egg, it got broken. That's what they told me."

"Egg? They had an egg?"

"But the whole thing wasn't, like, anybody's fault. There was nothing Brooke could have done about it, but it really got to him. I guess he felt like a man who can't protect his egg isn't fit to be a husband... so he left Cerise. But then they made up, and now they're a couple again."

"Gosh..." Hikaru-san blinked, but he was smiling. He could be a slippery customer, but I guess even he was a sucker for a happy ending.

"I'm pretty sure they said something about a soccer ball looking a lot like a lizardman egg, right, Minori-san?" I said, looking to her for confirmation. But she was completely absorbed in examining the autograph on her ball from every possible angle, and didn't seem to hear me.

"You've never seen one for yourself?" Hikaru-san asked.

"No," I said. Now that he mentioned it, I realized I only had Brooke and Cerise's word to go on as far as what a lizardman egg looked like. Apparently they carried it around by rolling it with their feet, so it probably wasn't the shape of a chicken egg, but closer to a spherical ball. Come to think of it, weren't sea turtle eggs supposed to be almost perfectly round? (I'd seen some videos of them laying eggs somewhere.) I guess there was nothing that said all reptile eggs had to be the same shape.

"Now that you bring it up, I've never even seen a lizardman

child,” I said.

I wondered what they looked like. I tried to picture one, but the best I could do with my minimal imagination was a sort of SD version of Brooke. You had the scales, the inscrutable expression, the kind of glinting eyes... Hmm, not very baby-like.

“I’m having some trouble with the mental picture here,” I said, tilting my head.

That was when I saw a figure emerge from the mansion, whose door had been hanging open.

“Oh,” I said.

A beast girl came pattering up to me. Elvia Harneiman...

She wagged her tail eagerly back and forth and said, “Shinichi-sama! Hikaru-sama! Minori-sama! Sorry to keep you waiti—”

But then she stopped short. Her big, round eyes were staring directly at... the autographed soccer ball Minori-san was holding. She hadn’t yet taken it out of the box (and probably never planned to), but it was one of those packages with one side cut away so you could easily see what was in it through a sheet of transparent material. Elvia could see that ball clear as day.

Minori-san started; she seemed to sense something untoward, and turned around. At which point—

“*Rrrrf!*”

Elvia made a sound exactly like a puppy excited by a toy and came charging in. Straight at Minori-san, or rather, at the ball she was holding.

Minori-san was pretty strong for a human woman, and super athletic too, but even she was going to find it hard to avoid a crazed werewolf. Elvia was an order of magnitude stronger than her, and Minori-san had to not only get out of the way, but protect her goods while she did it. I was sure this was going to end in a loud scream as Elvia stole another autographed ball.

“Hah!”

But at that moment, Minori-san pulled something out of a bag and flung it on the ground. There was a bright flash and a cacophonous explosion.

“A stun grenade?!”

A nonlethal flash-bang. The sort of thing the special forces would use when rescuing hostages or something. It didn’t shatter and cause injury like a normal fragmentation grenade, but the extremely bright light and extremely loud noise disoriented your opponents and sent them reeling. The blast just now wasn’t bright enough or loud enough to completely overwhelm our senses—in fact, I didn’t think it was even a real stun grenade. A little home cooking of Minori-san’s, I guessed.

What there was, though, was a whole lot of smoke.

“Yarf?!” Elvia exclaimed as she stumbled, suddenly unable to see.

“Mwahahahahaha! I knew this would happen, so I got this little surprise ready!”

“If you knew this was going to happen, why didn’t you just take your precious ball to your room right away, instead of standing there staring at it?!” I quipped. It was like she had become a different character altogether—not a JSDF soldier, but a ninja.

“See ya in hell!” she exclaimed (like a certain slayer of ninjas), before turning and running away through the smoke. What was *with* her?

Hikaru-san went over to help Elvia up; meanwhile...

“Umm... Shinichi-sama...?”

“Master. What shall we do...?”

Myusel and Brooke stood there holding cardboard boxes, but lost in the fog. We couldn’t see three steps in front of ourselves. It would probably be almost dangerous to walk around carrying a box. Especially for someone who was already kind of clumsy, like Myusel.

“Uhh... Just hang tight. I’m sure the smoke will clear in a few minutes,” I said, and sighed.



One thing we obviously had to do with all the new stuff was find a place for it. Manga and novels went on the bookshelves. DVDs had their own special shelf, too. There were only so many places to display figures and posters and the like, so we kept them on another dedicated shelf and changed them out regularly. Besides, it was just common sense that anything—be it a book, a poster, or figure—displayed too long would end up sunbleached. Rotating them was practically a necessity.

It was also another big job. It would be hard enough if this was all purely my own personal stuff. But all the otaku goods in the house were purchased with public money, ostensibly to help foster exchange with this alternate world. Ideally, we wanted to avoid depreciation as much as possible.

That’s right: from the outside it may have looked as if I was living on Otaku Easy Street, but it wasn’t as if I was just throwing my hands in the air and crying, “Yahoo! Otaku buying spree on the government’s yen!” No, I absolutely was not! Totally not! I hadn’t the barest thought of such base personal benefit!!

.....Please believe me (weak voice).

Uh, anyway.

It obviously wasn’t the work of a moment to unpack everything,

especially not when just flipping through a manga, trying to make sure it was what I expected, occasionally led to me sitting down and getting lost in reading it. I had a surprisingly small amount of time to really forget everything else and get completely absorbed in a book. Anyway, when I was doing this work, I made sure to split it up into lots of little pieces, taking breaks in between.

“Phew...” I left my room, stretching my arms in the air. I wasn’t going anywhere special. I just wanted a change of air. Often, my “breaks” consisted of doing a lap around the mansion and then getting back to work. Right now, my throat was feeling a little dry, so I went to the kitchen in search of some water.

“Oh.” I spotted Myusel coming down the hallway. “Hey, Myusel.”

She looked up when I called out—and her face immediately lit up. It seemed like she was really happy just to see me. We had been living in the same house for quite a while now, but still she always reacted like that. As an otaku with zero experience of dating an actual woman, I found it very, uh, heart-pounding.

“Is something the matter?” Myusel asked as she came up to me at a delicate jog.

“No, nothing. I’m just taking a little walk around the house to get a break from organizing stuff. Thought maybe I’d get myself a drink of water.”

“Let me make you tea!” she said and started back the way she had come.

“No, really, don’t worry about it. Are you cleaning right now, Myusel?” It was an educated guess: she was carrying a broom, a dustpan, and a big cloth bag.

“Yes, sir. I was going to pick up the leaves around the house and yard. And then there’s the laundry to do.” She gestured with her broom for emphasis. And that caused me to look at her hand.

“Myusel, what happened to your finger?”

One finger of the hand holding the broom was wrapped in a small white cloth. It didn’t look like some kind of fashion statement. In fact, something red was seeping through the cloth.

“What? Oh, when I was doing the dishes earlier, I broke a plate, I’m afraid...” She shrugged a little, but then added, “Um, I’m very sorry...”

“No, don’t worry about it.” I shook my head with a half-smile. “We’ve got plenty of dishes. But what about you? Did you hurt yourself?”

“I-I’m all right, sir. It’s just a shallow cut.”

“That’s good,” I said with relief.

Myusel could be very serious, or at least very hard on herself. So sometimes she kept pushing herself even when she was really tired, or

tried to continue working despite an injury. If I didn't check up on her to make sure she was doing all right, she certainly wouldn't come to me herself to say she was in pain or something.

A little cut, though, was probably all right. Again, for better or for worse, she was very serious, and I didn't think she would lie about something like how bad her injury was. But there was one thing I wanted to ask...

"Myusel, aren't you being a bit of a workaholic?"

She'd already lugged all those boxes inside, and now she was launching right into housework without so much as a break. First she had carried around all those heavy boxes, then washed all our dishes, now she was cleaning, and then she was going to do the laundry. I know, I know, it was her job to do the housework, but even so, it seemed like a lot to ask.

And this was *after* her individual workload had decreased when Cerise had joined us.

Come to think of it, I hadn't seen much of Cerise working around the house recently. Was something going on? She always showed up at mealtimes, so I hadn't thought much about it. She, like Myusel, was pretty straitlaced, so I didn't suspect her of slacking off, but I was worried that maybe she wasn't feeling well. I wasn't an expert on lizardman health—you couldn't exactly take their temperatures or check their complexion—but she had Brooke with her in the evenings, and I thought he would have mentioned to me if anything was wrong.

"If you don't mind, Myusel, I'd be happy to clean up the yard."

It was just a passing thought.

"What...?" Myusel's eyes went wide, and for a moment it was like she didn't understand what I was saying. But the moment it registered, she shook her head, hard. "N-No, I could never! I couldn't make you do something like that, Shinichi-sama!"

"Aw, I was the one who suddenly added carting boxes around to your list of chores earlier. And we don't have school today, anyway; I've got time to kill. I'd love to do something other than organize merchandise."

Then I plucked the broom out of Myusel's grip.

Her bandaged finger brushed my hand.

"I'm worried about that injury, too," I added. "If you have to move your fingers too much, the wound won't stay closed."

"B-But..."

"I really appreciate all the work you do around here, Myusel. Think of this as just a little token of my thanks. Okay?" As I talked, I relieved Myusel of the other items she was holding. (I didn't have to pry *too* hard.) She looked at me, confused, for a moment. As her master, whatever I said was effectively an order. I tried not to take

advantage of that, but it was still the case that she couldn't object.

"Listen, uh," I went on, scratching my cheek. This was sort of—well, embarrassing. "This is an order from your master. Don't do any more housework. Go back to your room and rest for a bit. Got that?"

I smiled at her as I spoke, and Myusel—whether because she finally accepted what I said, or because she was just resigned to it—nodded hesitantly. "Thank you, sir." She looked at the ground, blushing just a little.

Arrgh, what is with this girl's killer cuteness?!

"Shinichi-sama, you sound just like Brooke-san."

"Huh? Brooke?" There was a name I hadn't expected to hear just now. "Did he say something to you?"

"Oh, no, not to me. To Cerise-san." Myusel continued to stare at the ground. "I heard him tell her, 'You don't need to do the housework.' He said he would take care of it for her, and that she should go to her room and rest."

"Oh, I see." I did remember him saying he would do Cerise's share of the box-carrying. So maybe she was feeling a little under the weather?

"I thought, the way he cares for her like it's the most natural thing in the world, it's just... very husbandly. They're such a sweet couple. And to hear you say the same thing to me, Shinichi-sama..." Then she suddenly seemed to realize where she seemed to be going with this, and quickly looked up. "Oh, no, I don't mean—I didn't mean to imply —"

Uh, I think there was only one thing you could have been implying, talking like that. And I think she knew it, too, considering her ears were even redder than before.

Husbandly... A sweet couple... Huh.

For me personally, those words evoked first and foremost a mental picture of my mom and dad.

I was struck by an image: Myusel, wearing an apron like a loving young housewife. It quickly turned into an image of Myusel wearing nothing *but* an apron, and I chased the wayward thought out of my head as quickly as I could.

"Well, uh, I'm gonna get cleaning," I said.

"Th-Thank you again, sir," Myusel replied, still sounding awkward. And there we parted. I started down the hallway towards the yard, but then I glanced back, and found Myusel still standing where she had been behind me, her head respectfully bowed.



"Cleaning the yard" sounds like a lot of work, but I didn't actually

have to handle a very large area. It was normally Brooke, the groundskeeper, who would deal with the yard—pruning the trees, watering flowers, and getting any moss out the fountain, of course, but also taking care of any weeding. So although I had a look around, all that really needed to be done was to sweep up any fallen leaves around the building and gather them into my bag.

Thinking about whether we should toss them right on the fire—maybe make some baked potatoes with them—I started gathering up any leaves I saw.

Taking a survey like this made me realize just how large our yard really was. Like I said, the “yard” was everything the mansion wasn’t actually standing on. Out front, we had flower beds and the fountain and stuff, but in the back, there was even more uninterrupted land. Yes, there was a place to dry laundry, storehouses, and the little building Brooke and Cerise lived in, along with a smattering of other small structures. Even the workshop where Petralka’s body-double doll had been made was still there, on the assumption that we might want it for something else someday. But even if you added all of that together, “unoccupied yard” still won out over “places with buildings.”

The point is, even just collecting fallen leaves entailed fairly significant labor. It didn’t help that I wasn’t used to the work, and that I had recently spent a couple weeks locked in my room, leaving me even physically weaker than usual.

“Myusel does this every day?” I muttered. I really had to hand it to her. Until Cerise had come here, she’d been completely on her own doing all the cleaning, laundry, and cooking, everything that made our lives run smoothly. And on top of all that, she had been an occasional teacher in our school. I always knew that if you translated a homemaker’s work into an hourly wage, it would be a substantial amount of money... But Myusel didn’t even have a washing machine, dishwasher, or vacuum.

I had a thought: “You know, I could afford those things.”

As General Manager of Amutech, I did draw a salary, which was deposited regularly in my bank account. When I wanted some bit of merchandise from Japan for personal reasons, the amount was withdrawn from my account, but for the most part, I didn’t spend a lot of money over here, so it was just piling up.

I start to think about how much easier Myusel’s life would be with a refrigerator, a washing machine, dishwasher, and maybe a cordless vacuum. I would have to find one simple enough for her to use; maybe it was time to requisition a catalog. If I picked my moment carefully, I might be able to get a discount on an outgoing model, or find something newer on sale. There were plenty of great deals I could—

“Wait.”

Picking out household appliances? Wasn't that what newlyweds did?

My face flushed as I remembered what Myusel had said earlier, and I went back to cleaning.

“Hm?” I stopped when I spotted something that was definitely not a leaf or grass in the bushes. It almost looked like... a ball. A little smaller than a soccer ball, I figured. It was speckled brown and dark green. Buried in the dirt and grass, I could easily have overlooked it. If I hadn't been poking around looking for stuff to throw away, I might never have noticed it.



Did that mean it was... camouflaged?

“What is that, a rock? No, couldn’t be.” It might look like a stone from a distance, but on closer inspection, it was too smooth and round. The surface curved cleanly, no points or angles to be found anywhere.

I gave it a gentle poke with my broom, but it didn’t so much as budge.

What the heck was it? I shifted my broom so I was holding it in the same hand as the bag, set the dustpan on the ground, and gradually moved my right hand a little closer to the thing. I touched the surface.

“Huh...?” You couldn’t tell by looking, but it was actually gritty to the touch. Were these... scales?

“Gyoo!”

“Eeyargh!” I shouted as severe pain lanced through my outstretched hand. “Oww! Ow ow ow!” I tried to draw back, but I couldn’t. Half the palm of my right hand had been swallowed. The thing had bitten me. Its mouth looked like a jagged line.

“What?! What the heck?!” I cried, pulling my hand back forcefully, afraid the thing was going to bite my fingers off. It was too firmly attached, though, and wouldn’t come loose. Instead it sort of hung from my hand. It was awfully heavy, but I waved my hand wildly with strength born of panic. “Gaaahhhh! Somebody help meeeee!”

Not to brag, but I have a very low tolerance for pain. I can’t even watch gory movies. They’re as bad as if I were getting hurt myself. So now I just squeezed my eyes shut and struggled as I bellowed for help. Of course, I dropped the broom and bag in my other hand when I got bit.

“Shinichi-sama?!” Myusel said, shocked. I opened my eyes and turned toward her just as she was running up to me. I thought I’d told her to rest in her room—oh yeah, her room was near the back door of the house. She must have heard me shouting. Anyway, I was sure grateful.

“M-Myusel, help me! This thing...!” I blubbered. I felt pathetic, but it *hurt*, and I was scared.

Myusel, though, stopped cold with a look of shock.

“Help, get this thing off me...!” I was too busy being panicked to notice the change in her demeanor. I thrust my entrapped right hand toward her. Seriously, this hurt bad!

“Right, y-yes, sir.” Myusel reached out and tugged on the thing. And to my surprise, it calmly let go of me.

“Yikes!” With a cry worthy of a bumbling side character, I fell on my butt. I took a quick survey of my hand to see if I still had all my fingers, and I was happy to discover they were all present and

accounted for. But there was a series of small holes in a line along my palm and the back of my hand. They were oozing... blood?! Was that blood?!

These were definitely bite wounds!

“U-Um, Shinichi-sama!”

“Ahhhhhhh!” There was a new, prickly pain, very different from when I had been bitten, that spread across my hand. None of the individual bite wounds were very large or deep, and it wasn’t critical to stop the bleeding or anything, but...

“Shinichi-sama...”

“What? What is that thing? What’s a dangerous monster like that doing around here?!”

“This thing... No, this child—it’s a lizardman infant.”

“Say what?” I blinked, almost forgetting my discomfort as I looked at the thing Myusel was holding.

The surface was still a dapple of burnt brown and dark green. But it wasn’t a sphere anymore. It had arms and legs—even though they were very short—and even a tail. They must have been folded in earlier. It looked almost like... a stuffed dinosaur or lizard. Except for the scales.

“A lizardman...?”

“Gyoo!”

The tiny reptile (or anyway, reptile-like person) flailed its little arms as if trying to get away from Myusel. Actually, “tiny” was purely relative: it was obviously bigger than your average lizard.

“But that means...” I leaned in for a good look at the child. I guess I was looking for family resemblance to Brooke or Cerise.

“Gyoo!”

“Naaaaghhhh!”

I had leaned too close and ended up with a bitten nose.



It sat in the sun shining through the window of the small building: a soccer ball split clean in half, like you could practically see a *ba-dum!* sound effect above it.

Except it wasn’t a soccer ball. It was a lizardman egg.

“So... that’s a lizardman’s egg?” I asked, studying it closely.

There was a rush mat on the floor, on which rested five other eggs that hadn’t yet hatched.

“It *does* look just like a soccer ball.” I guess if you measured really closely, it probably wasn’t regulation size, and it didn’t have the official black-and-white pattern. It had what was probably camouflage instead, to conceal it from predators. But it definitely gave off a soccer

ball vibe.

“But it’s not,” Minori-san said from just behind me. “So Elvia, *hands off.*”

I shared her concern—it seemed like it would be all too easy for Elvia to forget herself and jump on the egg—but the beast girl replied with surprising composure, “I’m not gonna touch it.”

“Really?” Minori-san asked. “Even though it’s almost exactly the same size and shape as a soccer ball?”

“Yeah, but it *smells*,” Elvia said, her nose twitching.

“Smells...?”

“Yeah. That odor says bad news if you grab it.”

“Huh...” Minori-san said, cocking her head. I was surprised, too, but on second thought, I guess it was only natural—literally.

Werewolves in general, not just Elvia, got very excited when they saw something round. If they went and mindlessly attacked any lizardman eggs they saw, werewolves and lizardmen would have been mortal enemies before you knew it—in fact, it would practically have been a predator/prey relationship. We’re not talking about the sort of general annoyance that elves and dwarves felt for each other—this would be a struggle for survival. A bloodbath the minute they saw each other.

But Elvia claimed the smell of the egg told her to stay away. If that was true of all lizardman eggs and all werewolves, then whatever that odor was, it was preventing war between the two peoples.

All very interesting. Maybe I was overthinking it, or maybe this was specifically the egg’s way of telling any werewolves, *I’m not your beloved moon, stay away from me!*

I suddenly found myself wondering who would win in a fight: a lizardman or a werewolf. I guess it was sort of like asking which was better, judo or karate—not a very meaningful question. Who won would depend so much on circumstances and individual qualities, not to mention a bit of luck, that you could hardly say one would always prevail.

“I’ve never seen a lizardman egg before,” Myusel said, gazing at them with interest. “Or infant, either.” She turned back to look at Cerise, standing beside Minori-san and cradling the newborn gently. The same one that had been chewing on my nose shortly before.

After the nose-biting incident, Myusel and I had hurriedly sought out Brooke and Cerise. We had no specific proof that this was their child, but it seemed like the obvious conclusion—and anyway, we sure had no idea what to do with it.

Cerise, we found right away. She seemed awfully surprised when she saw Myusel holding the baby. Lizardman faces don’t show emotion quite the way humans are used to, but by now even I knew

that little details like the speed with which their tongues flicked in and out could indicate when they were startled. The biggest evidence, though, was the way she breathed, “But why...?”

But why what, we didn’t know, but we explained the situation to her and she brought us to the little annex where she and Brooke lived. That was where we saw the six eggs, one of them split open.

“Why just one?” Cerise murmured. She seemed very perplexed.

“What’s the matter? Is something wrong?”

“Well...” After a moment’s hesitation, Cerise explained to us. “As you know—as you can see—we lizardmen reproduce by laying eggs. How long it takes to hatch varies by season, but early hatchings are extremely unusual. I expected to wait at least another ten days...”

Lizardmen, apparently, laid eggs in pairs. So this meant Cerise had laid three pairs of eggs in a row. And somehow, not one of us had noticed.

Obviously, lizardman babies don’t grow in a womb, so they aren’t like humans where a mother’s belly gets bigger and bigger as the child grows, so much so that it starts to impact her daily life. Cerise could keep working just like normal. Maybe the reason she’d been absent the last few days was because she had been tired from laying eggs. It was why Brooke had told her to take off.

Come to think of it, Brooke *had* asked me at one point if it would be all right if he and Cerise had a child. This was evidently the result. I’d felt the topic was delicate enough that I hadn’t asked for details, but had said it would be fine.

“I wonder if that could be the reason?” Minori-san said now, pointing to a window. Sunlight poured through it. It was a sort of skylight, but the glass around here wasn’t like the industrially manufactured, consistent stuff I was used to in Japan. The thickness of any given pane of glass could vary widely, and sometimes the material was warped. Here, it almost acted like a lens, focusing and heating the light that came through it.

“I vaguely remember hearing that how long it takes an egg to hatch can be affected by temperature,” she said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Uh-huh. There’s a numerical relationship between temperature and incubation that’s consistent across a species. Like, if it takes a month to hatch an egg at 25 degrees, then the number is 750. At 20 degrees, it would take forty days, but at 35 degrees, it would be just twenty-five days. I think the sunlight from the window must have been hitting just the one egg.”

“It’s possible,” Cerise said. “Brooke and I aren’t here during the day, so we didn’t notice.”

So, to sum up: a warped pane of window glass had acted like a

lens or prism, focusing the light and producing an effect that even Brooke and Cerise hadn't anticipated—but only on one egg. I guess we could count ourselves lucky it hadn't ended up fried. It's one thing when glass bends or splits light, but when it focuses it on a single point, that point can get very hot. If the temperature had gone up to fifty or sixty degrees, the point at which proteins start to degenerate, this baby might not have been born at all.

"So this little one was born first, and decided to have an adventure in the yard," Minori-san said, glancing at the child Cerise was holding. "Which is where Shinichi-kun found it."

"Yeah, and had no idea what it was. It was all... round."

"That's something we do to protect ourselves from enemies while we're resting," Cerise said, as the infant in her arms gave a big yawn. Rows of little fangs were already growing in its mouth. The twenty-odd puncture wounds in my hand were a testament to the nastiness of that creature's jaws. Ugh, just remembering it made my hand hurt again... Even if Minori-san had disinfected and bandaged it with supplies from a first-aid kit. My nose had suffered less thoroughly and got by with just a Band-Aid. It might be a baby, but it was also a lizardman... and I guess they grew faster than humans.

There were lots of animals, even other mammals like horses and deer, whose infants were capable of walking within an hour of being born. Maybe humans were just behind the curve.

"Still, Cerise, you should have let us know your eggs were going to be hatching," I said with a half-smile, and she looked apologetic.

"I'm quite sorry about that. As I said, I thought I still had a while until they hatched, and I intended to inform you properly then..."

She seemed to be set on not getting any special attention or treatment from us.

You might recall that the reason Cerise and Brooke had lived apart for a while, or been separated or whatever you want to call it, was because their eggs had been broken without hatching. In their minds, they probably felt it was too early to tell anyone about the eggs until they were safely hatched. They didn't want to celebrate prematurely.

"Well, whatever the case, I'm just glad this little one is safe and sound," Minori-san said, smiling.

"You're right about that," I said. The first of the eggs had hatched with minimal fuss. My eyes met those of the child Cerise was holding, and I found my mouth softening into a smile. There were obvious differences between human and lizardman babies, including the fangs, scales, and general appearance, but it had that sort of SD cuteness. It did look just like a tiny version of Brooke and Cerise, and it was actually really charming.

Not only that, but when our eyes met, the baby waved its tiny

arms and legs in response to me.

Wow, that's so sweet! Without really thinking about it, I reached out to give the child a pat. I was sure it had just been surprised before. Not to mention the whole poking-it-with-a-broom thing. But right now, we were all nice and calm, and I was sure it would be fine—

“Gyu!”

“Nrgh?!”

—or not.

The innocent flailing suddenly became animal speed as the child latched onto my fingers.

“M-Master!” Cerise quickly grabbed the child’s mouth so it couldn’t bite down any further. That meant I at least escaped with all my fingers intact (again), but boy, those tiny teeth really bit deep. This was a hunter, latching onto prey so it couldn’t escape.

At that moment, the door of the little house came flying open. “Cerise!” Brooke rushed in. Of course, his face looked substantially like it always did, but from his body language you could tell how and agitated he was. He was holding a scythe, presumably something he used to cut grass while doing the groundskeeping. “I—I heard one of them was b—”

He saw the child in Cerise’s arms and couldn’t say another word.

It was perfectly understandable that he, the father, would be in a tizzy on hearing that one of his eggs had hatched earlier than expected, but Brooke was completely frozen to the spot.

“Born.....”

He looked at us blankly. Specifically, looked at me, and at the baby lizardman currently biting down on my fingers.

“Master.” Cerise forced the child’s jaws open so I could finally free my hand, which I gratefully pulled back. During the entire thing, Brooke was completely silent. Everyone in the small house, with its nervous air, looked at him—and finally he slumped to the ground right where he was.

Huh?

What was with him? I had been sure he was going to take the child in his arms in a fit of joy. Maybe the emotion had just overwhelmed him?

“Master...” Brooke said, his voice uncommonly soft.

“What?” I asked, going over to him. I noticed Hikaru-san arriving through the open door. He was out of breath; probably from running after Brooke who had raced over when he heard about his child.

But anyway...

“Me, I’m... a father.”

“You sure are. Congratu—”

“And being as I’m a father now...” For some reason, he lifted the

scythe in his hands.

Uh, um... This was a very small room for such a big weapon...!

“...let the responsibility for my child’s misbehavior be on—me!”

“Stop! Halt! Don’t! Elvia, stop him!”

“On it!”

Before Brooke could bring the scythe down, Elvia grabbed his arm. But it was all she could do to hold on; there was no hope of wrenching the weapon away from him. They were almost equal on strength, Brooke’s arm trembling as Elvia dangled from it.

“Do not stop me, wolf! Master, please, let this be settled with one arm of mine!”

“No! You really don’t have to settle anything!” I cried.

I said I couldn’t stand gory stuff!

The relationship between me and Brooke was ultimately one of master and servant. I could see what was going on here: the servant’s child had injured the master, and now Brooke thought someone had to pay for it. That if he sacrificed an arm, I might be satisfied. But that was going too far! Even the you-know-whos settled grievances with just one finger! And apparently even they were modernizing in a hurry these days and chopping off fewer fingers than ever! Okay, not really relevant.

“Lizardmen are carnivores, right? Maybe the baby just doesn’t know it’s not supposed to eat humans yet.” Minori-san’s comment was almost but not quite on point. And what was I, a prey animal?! I mean, yeah, I guess I pretty much was. But this kid was only a few hours old and it was already hunting game several times its size. That’s aggression for you.

“Wh-Whatever, listen—the kid was just born, it can’t even talk yet! These things happen! It’s okay! I’m all good, right? I’m hardly even hurt!” I hid my injured hand behind my back as I spoke. It was actually exceedingly painful, but if I said anything like that, I could tell Brooke would lop his arm straight off, so I just put on my best face.

“Anyway,” I said, trying to change the subject at least a little, “I’m amazed how it gets around when it just hatched. Lizardmen grow in a hurry, huh?”

“Yes,” Brooke said, finally starting to calm down. At least he had lowered his arm, Elvia and all. “At least compared to humans, I should think. I would expect the child to be walking within the day, and speaking three or four days from now.”

“Geez, there’s fast and then there’s fast!”

It took humans a year to start standing and walking, and at least that long to make more than baby gurgles. Sure, you might get a word or two out of a younger infant, but meaningful sentences started at

around three or four years old. Lizardmen were way ahead of us. Wait... Could it be lizardmen were actually a lot smarter than humans...? Or maybe they had about the same intellectual capacities as humans, but just reached them faster?

It was all enough to make my head spin. But I was sure starting to feel some biological inferiority...

Maybe I should have expected as much from a world with magic and dragons and stuff.

"So, Brooke," I said, with my best it's-really-no-big-deal smile. (Uh-oh. Maybe lizardmen were no better at reading human facial expressions than we were at reading theirs. A mystery for another time.) "Hurry up and hold your new child."

"Thank y', sir," he said after a long moment, finally hefting himself off the floor.

"Here, Brooke," Cerise said, walking over to him and handing him the baby.

He took it with hesitation and wonder. For a while, he just stared at the kid, who waved and squirmed in his arms. He looked partly moved, and partly just confused. We all watched him, our hearts in our throats.

After a long silence, he said, "Cerise."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Just that. We waited, but he didn't say anything else.

Cerise said, "Of course."

Just that. They weren't embarrassed, or tongue-tied. They had a bond of trust that made those words enough. Maybe this was what it meant to be so close to someone you could almost read their thoughts.

This husband and wife, they were really... awesome.

I discovered that made me happy.



Some time after Brooke's emotional meeting with his child...

We had gathered in the living room for a bit of a banquet. I wanted to take this opportunity to get to know Brooke's new family member.

I had wondered if lizardman infants would look sort of craggy in comparison to human babies, but the kid's big, round eyes made it surprisingly (in a good sense) lovable. I guess plenty of people hate snakes, but when you really look at them, they've got cute eyes. I've heard lots of girls have pet reptiles. As long as you're okay with the scales, they really look pretty sweet.

But anyway...

“Come to think of it, what are you going to name it?” I asked Brooke and Cerise as I watched the baby tumble on the carpet.

“Yessir. We were considering Man’ya.”

“That’s a nice name.” It... *fit* this child, somehow. It was cute.

Speaking of cute, I was just realizing that the baby was a girl.

Myusel and Elvia crouched by Man’ya, enjoying watching her as she wandered around. Man’ya, for her part, was capable of standing upright, but her balance wasn’t very good yet, and every few steps she would tumble to the ground. Luckily, she didn’t have far to fall, and she instinctively curled up into a ball, so it didn’t seem to do her any harm.

“U-Um, Cerise-san?” Myusel looked up at Man’ya’s mother with some nervousness.

“Yes, do you need anything?”

“W-Would it be... all right if I touched her...?”

“Of course, go ahead,” Cerise said.

“What, really?” I asked, all too aware of my punctured hand, but Myusel, completely enamored of Man’ya’s cuteness, said, “It’ll be all right—I think.” She didn’t sound completely convinced. Nonetheless, she reached out to the child.

There was a pause. Man’ya gave Myusel’s hand a quizzical look. She didn’t seem like she was about to attack it, but we already knew that reptiles were experts at ambush. I watched, anxious, but...

“She’s so cute!”

There was no biting at all. Man’ya politely let Myusel pat her head. In fact, she crawled closer to Myusel and stuck out her head as if to ask for more.

This seemed to flip some strange switch even for Elvia. “M-Me, too!” she exclaimed. “I wanna touch her, too! Can I?”

“Certainly. In fact, would you like to hold her?” Cerise said.

“Can I?!”

“I’d l-like to, too...” Myusel said. When Elvia had had a turn patting the baby on the head, Cerise picked up little Man’ya and handed her to Myusel. “Ohhh...” Myusel breathed as she held the child in her arms.



“Am... Am I doing it right?”

“Well, lizardmen are quite different from humans, elves, or werewolves,” Cerise offered. “It’s rare for us to carry our children from place to place. Instead, the younglings usually cling to their parents’ bodies. We pick them up, and then they find a spot that’s comfortable.”

“Huh, so that’s how it works,” I said, impressed.

It made sense: with five or six kids, a parent could hardly hope to carry all the babies at once. Plenty of animals, even mammals, transported their young on their bodies like that. Lizardmen were apparently one of them. And anyway, what we called “carrying” a child was fundamentally about allowing them to nurse, but lizardmen didn’t breast-feed. As I knew from experience, Man’ya had a perfectly good set of teeth for eating solid food even though she was just a newborn.

I guess in my own world, reptiles weren’t famous for paying a lot of attention to their offspring. Compared with that, lizardmen looked like pretty good parents—protecting their eggs and raising the young. Closer to humans than snakes.

“Me too, me too!” Elvia exclaimed, bouncing around Myusel, who was concentrating very hard on not dropping Man’ya. Her tail wagged furiously; she was obviously excited. But it wasn’t like when she saw the soccer ball. There was no sense that she had completely lost herself.

Huh. I had never really taken Elvia for the motherly type, but I guess instincts are instincts.

Speaking of which...

“Me too, if you don’t mind...” Minori-san said, getting up from the couch.

Wow, even her?

Man’ya was passed from Myusel’s arms to Elvia’s, then even Minori-san’s. She didn’t seem to mind being part of this impromptu relay, and hardly squirmed at all as she went from person to person.

Hmm. I guess lizardman children *are* supposed to be sponges when it comes to language. Maybe she was already learning that these people were her friends. Or at least, maybe she had learned not to randomly bite them.

Okay, then!

“L-Let me try!” I said, standing up. Hey, I like cute things as much as the next guy. “Oh,” I added, “what about you, Hikaru-san?”

“I’m fine just watching,” he said with an *I’ll-pass* wave. “I get nervous around tiny things.”

Yeah, I could understand that. You always had to worry that they might break if you so much as touched them. But as for me, having

waved Man'ya around vigorously while she was latched onto my hand, I knew she was tougher than that.

"C'mere, Man'ya, sweetie!" I reached out for the child in Minori-san's arms. Uh-oh. I already sounded like I was talking to a cat or something.

"I sense trouble brewing," Hikaru-san said.

"Oh, don't be a spoilsport," I shot back, taking Man'ya—

"Gyu!"

"Nggghhaaaa!"

—who promptly chomped down on my arm.

"Man'ya, no!" Cerise said, freeing the child from my limb. At least she let go right away this time, but there was a fresh row of teeth marks around my left elbow. It hurt.

"Shinichi-sama, are you all right?" Myusel asked.

"Y-Yeah, thanks..." I nodded. It wasn't exactly true—in fact, this hurt like heck—but the wounds weren't deep or anything. I would get some disinfectant and be fine. "But why am I the only one?" Man'ya had been perfectly sweet for Myusel, Elvia, and Minori-san. Was it because I was human? But so was Minori-san. Or maybe she only bit guys?

"I—I am so sorry, Master!" While I pondered, Brooke threw himself to the floor and produced a hatchet from God knew where. "Allow me to take responsibility for—"

"G-Geez, stop that! I told you you don't need to—stop!"

This time Elvia grabbed him without my saying anything and successfully pried the hatchet from his hand. What was he doing walking around with something like that, anyway?! No gore! Please!

But there was a part of me that thought, *So this is what it means to be a parent.*

Brooke was normally so calm and composed. Even setting aside my difficulty reading lizardman expressions, he didn't seem very emotive. I had very rarely seen him get excited. But when it came to anything to do with Man'ya, he always seemed on the verge of plunging into a kowtow and then comboing into splitting his belly open. I'd heard the birth of a child could throw a switch that turned a person into a totally dedicated parent—maybe that's what I was seeing.

I almost admired it, in a way. There was nothing for me to criticize. But seriously, I wondered about this thing with the kid.

"Hey, Hikaru-san, I think you should try to hold Man'ya," I said, turning to him where he sat on the couch.

"Who, me? Why?"

"I'm just wondering if she bites me because I'm a man."

"She doesn't bite Brooke."

“Okay, a human man, then. If that’s the story, then she should bite you, too.”

Consider it a little experiment in Man’ya’s favorite targets. I would be really disappointed if I were the only one she wasn’t friendly towards, so I had a lot riding on this.

“In other words, you want me to be a human guinea pig,” Hikaru-san grumbled, looking at me with ice-cold eyes.

“It would be so sad if I was the only one she didn’t get along with.”

“God, you... Bah, fine.” Hikaru-san heaved himself up off the couch and went over to Cerise. It looked like maybe he *was* interested in holding Man’ya in spite of his protestations. “Just be sure you get her back right away if she latches onto me,” he said, then slowly, carefully reached out toward the baby.

We all watched with bated breath. And Man’ya...

She climbed politely into Hikaru-san’s arms. More than politely, in fact. She practically seemed to be nuzzling up to him.

Hikaru-san’s expression softened. It’s a good feeling to have something small and cute warm up to you. Supporting Man’ya with his left arm, he stroked her head with his right hand. No sign of biting anywhere.

“Gyu,” she said. She sounded downright affectionate.

“But why?!” I wailed. “Why only me?!” How could the difference between us be so stark?!

It wasn’t fair! What had I ever done to her? I mean, besides poking her with a broom when we first met.

Did she hate me? Was I the object of hatred?!

“Maybe she just doesn’t *realize* you’re a guy, Hikaru-san!”

“I can’t say that’s impossible, but...” Hikaru-san looked thoughtful. “You think maybe it could actually be a kind of imprinting?”

“Buh?”

“Or maybe she just sees you as beneath her, Shinichi-san.” Hikaru-san passed Man’ya back to Myusel as he talked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you know. Predators attack animals that look weak to them, right?”

“That’s ridiculous!”

Even if I did admit that two weeks as a shut-in had left me without much confidence in my muscles!

“I can’t speak to the lizardman life cycle, but maybe she remembers you’re the first thing she ever bit, and now she thinks of you as food.”

“That’s the worst kind of imprinting I’ve ever heard of!”

I thought imprinting was supposed to be when baby animals

assumed the first thing they saw was their mother—something cute like that, right?! What was this law-of-the-jungle stuff?!

“How was it for us?” Cerise said.

“Fraid I can’t recall...” Brooke replied. I guess they wouldn’t; it was immediately after they were born.

Unlike mammals, which fed their young with milk, lizardman babies didn’t get liquid sustenance from their parents. They had to be able to feed themselves the moment they hatched. Considering how many reptiles simply left their eggs to fend for themselves, a hunting instinct made sense. It just happened to cause her to hunt me.

So, wait.

Did that make me Man’ya’s first prey? Like maybe if I were fighting with someone and losing badly, she would step in and save my skin with a “Hold it. He’s *my* prey”? Was this a *tsundere* thing? No, no it wasn’t. (Fantasies inspired by far too much agitation.)

“I can’t believe this...” I hung my head, virtually overwhelmed by the outrageousness of the situation. A wave of Man’ya moe was washing over Amutech, and I was the only one who couldn’t share in it. How lonely, to be an outcast.

“Is that really how you feel...?” Myusel asked Man’ya doubtfully. “Gyu!” she replied, tossing her tiny hands in the air as if to make very clear that yes, yes it was.



Breathing as quietly as possible, I gazed at Man’ya from the shadows. Did I look like a total creeper stalking some kid? Yeah, pretty much. I was no Hikaru-san, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that an incident was going to occur even if I didn’t do anything.

“Gyu.”

Man’ya was playing by herself in the yard. I was the only one around; everyone else was busy with work. Apparently, lizardman parenting was pretty *laissez-faire*, hence why Man’ya was wandering around unsupervised. They seemed to figure that as long as she didn’t go off the property, there really wasn’t anything to threaten her. Like an errant carriage that might run her over, for example.

Man’ya seemed like a cheery baby for the most part. She pulled up some grass here, dug a little hole there, chased after some bugs, going happily from one object of interest to another.

“Gyu?”

Suddenly, though, she seemed to sense that she was being watched. She tilted her head quizzically. I walked out from the shadow of the tree I’d been hiding by and approached her slowly. She watched me steadily, not moving. She just kept those big, round eyes

focused on me.

“Heh...” I started to smile. Hikaru-san’s theory was that Man’ya saw me as weak, an inferior form of life, and therefore as prey. I knew how smart lizardmen were, though, and I reasoned that if I could just convince Man’ya that I was actually bigger and stronger than she was, she would reclassify me in her mental catalog.

Now, I wasn’t planning anything crazy. I wasn’t going to attack the kid or something. I just had to show off some kind of abilities that would make her think, “*Whoa, this Shinichi-san isn’t half bad!*”

And to that end...

“Heh heh heh heh...” I chuckled, producing a hastily assembled “*mu ren*,” a wooden training dummy. You know the type. The vaguely humanoid wooden posts that Shaolin monks are always using for training in movies? It had a weight at the “waist,” so even if it leaned a little from a good smack, it would come back upright.

“Gyu?”

Man’ya looked at me and the dummy curiously, as if to say, *What’s that?* I set up the post, took a couple steps back, and assumed a fighting stance. And then...

“*Hwacha!*”

One good punch. Right smack in the dummy’s face, sending it wobbling. Perfect. Great start.

“Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiyahhhhhhhh!” I followed up with a flurry of quick punches.

It’s the Most Secret Technique of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution of Kicking Ass!! Offense is the Best Defense Fist!! (Came up with this name on the spot.)

The dummy swung back and forth under the fury of my blows.

“Now I’ll finish you!” I exclaimed, coming around for a showy roundhouse kick. “*Taaaake this!*”

Sheer centrifugal force slammed the dummy back. Then it must have gotten caught in some branches of the nearby bush or something, because it stopped cold at an angle of about sixty degrees.

Good. Good.

Satisfied, I turned to Man’ya, who had been watching my every move.

“Guess we won’t be seeing any more of that g—urgh?!”

Just as I was delivering a dry-cool bit of wit to close things out, the dummy came flying back up. The unexpected blow knocked me to the ground, where I sprawled right in front of Man’ya.

Uggghh, so not cool!

Man’ya, though, didn’t laugh at me, just looked at me with those round eyes.

So. Uh, had I succeeded in convincing her I was strong? I brushed

off some dirt and propped myself up on one knee, then reached out to her...

“*Raemu!*” she exclaimed, and her teeth clamped down.

Wow, lizardman children do learn words fast.

Mostly Man’ya still made meaningless “Gyu!” noises, but at just three days old, she could already call Cerise *amu-amu* (Mama) and Brooke *apu-apu* (Papa). Sometimes she would even parrot an Eldant word here or there.

Man’ya, if you were wondering, wasn’t wearing a ring to enable interpreting between the Japanese and Eldant languages. But I had learned enough conversational Eldant to understand what she had said. It was a simple word that meant: food.

“Eeeyow...” I hissed, her tiny teeth digging into my hand. But I fought the urge to shout. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t cry. The whole point was to make Man’ya realize I was stronger than her, so it was imperative that I seem unconcerned about her attacks. “Hm? Did you do something?” was what I wanted to communicate.

Heh... I curled my lips slightly in an attempt at a disinterested smile. It hurt, but I could endure.

“See? It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t hurt at all,” I said, like the heroine of a certain anime beckoning over that fox or squirrel or whatever it was. Kanou Shinichi, time to strut your stuff!

“Gyu!”

“It doesn’t hurt!”

“.....”

“It... doesn’t...”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“Aaaaargh yes it dooooooooooes!”

This kid’s fangs were really painful! Tiny but so, so sharp! And she had, like, thirty of them, all digging into my hand at once! I flapped my arm, trying to shake Man’ya free, but she seemed to have decided it was *her* turn to strut her stuff, and stayed steadfastly attached to me. Out of options, I took a tree branch I had brought along for this purpose and wedged it into her jaws, using it like a lever to force them open.

I was somehow able to free myself. *Ahhhhh*. My right hand was starting to look like a pincushion. Too many more of these bites and it would be as torn up as if it had been hit with buckshot.

Man’ya, for her part, was still staring at me...

“...*Raemu.*”

“Not *raemu!*” I exclaimed.

So she really did see me as her next meal!

“Aw, for...!”

Man’ya and I had known each other for all of five days now. We seemed destined to be predator and prey forever.



There was a long and winding road ahead, filled with traps and danger, hurdles and obstacles, and lots of other words that meant a rough time.

I was in an absolute slump.

Over the past several days, I’d tried a few different things to make friends with Man’ya. I’d gotten down on all fours so we were the same “height.” I’d tried tempting her with a toy, and sometimes even came up behind her and just swept her up in a hug. But every attempt ended with her exclaiming “*Raemu!*” and clamping her jaws down on my arm, fingers, or other readily available extremity, sometimes so hard I almost jumped out of my clothes. I was covered in bite marks by now.

“It hurts...” I groaned as I soaked the wounds in medicine.

“Are you all right, Shinichi-sama?”

I was lying on the couch in the living room, Myusel attending to my various injuries. Man’ya’s teeth were small—or if you will, fine—so there wasn’t a lot of bleeding, but they did create an extensive network of delicate punctures that stung every time they were swabbed with medicine.

“Not really, but yeah,” I said, trying to smile. “I’m real sorry about this, Myusel. And thanks.”

I took another inventory of my body: my arms and legs were covered in bandages. Real gauze rolls; the little stick-on things weren’t doing the job anymore.

“Man... How do I convince her I’m a friend, not food?” I sighed.

“I’ve got an idea: how about you just give it up already?” This exasperated suggestion came from Hikaru-san, sitting on the other couch reading a book. He shrugged elaborately and closed his reading, looking over at me—or really, at my bandaged hands and bitten fingers. “I think if you get any more hurt, Brooke is finally going to commit hara-kiri.”

“Hrrm...” I was unsettled by how easily I could picture it.

“Wearing long sleeves and pants has done the trick so far.” Myusel had finished bandaging me, so I rolled my sleeves back down.

Hikaru-san wasn’t wrong: if I drew too much attention to the wounds, I was afraid Brooke would try to “take responsibility” for his kid again. I didn’t think any of this was particularly his fault, but knowing something about Brooke’s social position, I hardly expected

him to just go, “Y’know, you’re right!” and laugh it off. (Did lizardmen even laugh?)

And so, with that in mind, I’d been keeping my quest to make friends with Man’ya a secret from Brooke and Cerise.

“Seriously, quit already. It’s the perfect solution: Brooke doesn’t have to kill himself to make up for his daughter’s attacking you, and *you* don’t have to kill *yourself* trying to get on the kid’s good side.”

“But what if she starts by thinking of me as prey, and ends up thinking of all of humanity as a potential food source? It’s all well and good when I’m the only one she’s biting, but what if Petralka were to come over and Man’ya went after her?”

We would be lucky if Brooke was the only one who had to “take responsibility” for an incident like that. Heck, lizardmen could end up extinct in the Eldant Empire.

“She hasn’t shown any interest in biting anyone but you, Shinichi-san. I think it would be fine. But if you’re really worried, the simplest thing would be just to keep her away from any humans for a while. Lizardmen mature fast. Once she can understand language a little better...”

“I get what you’re saying, Hikaru-san,” I said with a half-smile, interrupting him. “But this is Brooke and Cerise’s daughter, and I really want her to understand that I’m a friend. I’m so eager to get to know her.”

Or to put it another way, it was disheartening to be the only one who *wasn’t* her friend. Man’ya seemed to like everyone else in the house just fine. And Brooke and his family weren’t going anywhere. It wasn’t realistic to hope I could just avoid his kids forever.

“It’s okay, Shinichi-sama, I’m sure of it.” Myusel, wrapping up her most recent round of first aid, clenched her fists as she spoke. “I know you’ll find a way to be friends with Man’ya-chan!”

“Myusel, baseless, subjective pronouncements are going to trap Shinichi-san, not help him,” Hikaru-san said. Man, he was cold. Right, but cold.

“I don’t think it’s baseless...” Myusel looked at the ground for some reason. “Like me... Before I came here, I was always... a little shy, I guess. I made a lot of mistakes in my work. But in spite of all of that, Shinichi-sama, he...”

I blinked. “Shy? You, Myusel?” A little retiring, maybe. Clumsy for sure. But I had never thought of her as outright shy. “You never seemed that way to me.”

“But that’s exactly what I—because I’ve been able to work with you, Shinichi-sama...”

According to Myusel, at her last posting, she had been frequently criticized as “careless” or “slow.” She had worked at three separate

noble houses before she came to our place, but never for very long—hardly more than a trial period at each, you might say. Plus, the complication of being a half-elf made her reluctant to talk to people, so she couldn't even get close to the other maids at the places she worked. She ended up bullied, isolated... It didn't sound like a good time.

Now that I thought about it, back when we had first met, she had come across as terrified that she was going to be yelled at every time she made a minor mistake, and now I realized that maybe it was because she'd felt this mansion was her last chance.

Obviously, I hadn't realized at the time that Myusel thought she was shy, or that she was hiding some kind of inner turmoil. Instead I just burst out, "*IS THAT A **REAL** MAID?!*" and generally made such a fuss that she probably felt she had better start talking or she was going to get left behind.

"So it's... thanks to you, Shinichi-sama," Myusel concluded, her cheeks red.

Whoa-oh-oh. Too cute!

"Yep. Okay. Thank you very much," Hikaru-san broke in, sounding put out for some reason.

Oh, what?

"Anyway, Shinichi-san, if you're really dead set on this, I won't stop you."

"Cool. Yeah, I'll give it a shot."

At the very least, I was going to get myself out of the "*raemu*" category.



Myusel was a superb maid. She said she hadn't worked very long at any one place before this, but when I thought about how that was exactly what had enabled her to end up at our mansion, I was secretly kind of grateful for it.

When it came to food, in particular, you couldn't hope for a better cook. I have to think that at her previous workplaces, the senior maids, not to mention any professional cooks, probably didn't let some newly arrived broom jockey anywhere near the kitchen. So I'll bet none of her previous employers ever suspected her culinary gifts.

She showed special attention to the details in her cooking. In addition to herself, a half-elf, this mansion was populated by humans, a werewolf, and a couple of lizardmen, for a total of four different races, and Myusel made separate dishes with specific ingredients for each of them. As a werewolf, for example, Elvia had stronger senses of smell and taste than the rest of us, so even when her food looked

approximately like ours, it was often just lightly cooked, without any spices. Brooke and Cerise, by contrast, got a thoughtful assortment on their plates, but it was generally raw. Vegetables might be pickled, but never cooked. Periodically, Myusel would add fruits to get them some variety.

And what about Man'ya? She ate substantially the same things as her parents, just a little less of them. She sat between the two of them in a high chair Brooke had built, chowing down with gusto. Pickles, in particular, she would simply swallow whole.

"Do you like it?" Myusel asked, looking at the child sweetly.

"Gyoo!" Man'ya replied, nodding. She didn't, however, bother to stop eating. She seemed really... baby-like. In that respect, it seemed like lizardman and human children weren't so different. Myusel wasn't the only one who smiled when she looked at Man'ya; we all did.

"Master," Brooke said out of the blue. "I really am sorry t' ask, but might I be excused from my duties for the day tomorrow? M' wife and I are going to do our homecoming."

"Homecoming?"

"Strictly speaking, we'd be going back to our clan's reservation," Cerise said. "It's about a half day's journey from here by bird-drawn carriage."

"Oh, really? Sure, fine by me. But why so suddenly?" I had no particular reason to stop them. But neither of them had ever mentioned going back to their reservation until this moment. Why bring it up now?

Brooke had once been considered a hero of his clan, and Cerise-san was the daughter of a prominent chieftain in the Tribal Council, so if something was up at home, they might well be called back. If this "homecoming" was just for a pleasant visit, then I would be happy to send them on their way, but if something serious was going on, they needed to go deal with it, not waste time asking for my permission. And they should spend more than just one day on it.

But Brooke said, "We've got it in mind to inform the chieftains about Man'ya."

"Oh, is that all? Wait, you never told them?"

"We figured on waitin' until all the eggs had hatched, but..."

Incidentally, it was now nine days since Man'ya had been born. The other eggs hadn't hatched yet, although we expected they would soon.

"Man'ya was born just a bit *too* early, it seems." Brooke looked at the child sitting next to him. Man'ya, who was stuffing herself with so much food she looked like she might burst, noticed him watching her and looked up at him, cocking her head. As gestures go, it was—well, it was adorable! "I'm aware of how a heated egg might hatch sooner

than the rest of a clutch,” said my gardener, “but it’s just been too long. We wanted to tell the chieftains about the birth, and confer with the elders about the other eggs.”

Ah—that made sense. Man’ya looked happy and healthy, but they were worried that her premature birth might cause problems down the road. They probably wanted to ask if anyone else had experienced anything like this, and see if they could get any advice.

“Besides, we’re worried that once the others are born, we might not be able to take enough time to go back. Best do it when we’ve only one.”

“It’s fine by me,” I said. “Oh, but Myusel, you’ll have to take over all of the housework for the day. You all right with that?”

“Er, yes,” she responded, a little surprised when I suddenly turned to her. “I’ll be fine.”

I guess she had handled everything all the time before Cerise got here. And there was no school tomorrow, so I could help out, too. We would manage.

“Pardon us for the trouble. And thank you very much,” Cerise said, and she and Brooke both bowed their heads. Even Man’ya nodded in a monkey-see-monkey-do imitation of her parents, getting a smile out of all of us.

“We’ll just leave Man’ya to play by herself like she always does, so you won’t need to worry about her,” Cerise said.

“You’re not taking her with you?”

“The carriage will only take us partway,” Brooke replied. “The last leg’s a challenging stretch through the mountains. I worry it might be difficult with Man’ya. Anyhow, we only intend on the briefest stay. Best to travel light.”

“Okay.”

I couldn’t imagine a ten-day-old human infant being apart from its parents for an entire day, but Man’ya could already walk on her own and even eat solid food. Maybe it would be safer if she didn’t go on any hikes. You know what they say—curiosity killed the... uh, lizardman.

“Sounds good. Just leave Man’ya to us.”

“We’ll make sure everyone *other* than Shinichi-san keeps a close eye on her,” Hikaru-san said.

“And just what makes you say that, Hikaru-san?” I demanded. “Is it because you’re a bully? Are you bullying me?”

“You, Shinichi-san, need to focus your efforts on not being *raemu*.”

“Hrm...” I grumbled. Not much I could say to that.

“Be a good girl and do what they tell you,” Cerise said to Man’ya.

“Gyu!” Man’ya answered, and waved her arm.



Brooke and Cerise left the mansion early the next morning. For the rest of us, life went on pretty much as normal. Myusel had housework to take care of; Elvia was in her room drawing. There was no school, so Minori-san and Hikaru-san were both in their own rooms. And as for me...

“All right...!”

Breakfast was over, and I was on my way to the yard with some fruit Myusel had prepared for me. It wasn't a snack for myself; I was going to give it to Man'ya. My plan was that by plying her with fruit, I would teach her that I wasn't food, but a giver of food. A feeder, not to put too fine a point on it. I felt a little pathetic having to resort to what amounted to bribery, but considering the epic failure of the “look cool” approach, I was starting to get a little desperate.

“Today's the day!”

The current situation wasn't just bad for my fingers; it was taking a mental toll on me to constantly worry that Brooke might do himself in to save his family's honor.

Taking pains to hide in the shadows of trees or among the grass, I looked for Man'ya. I knew she was playing in the yard somewhere. I was afraid if I just suddenly called out to her, she'd bite me, so I would have to pick the right moment to give her this fruit. I was starting to feel like the gamekeeper for some wild animal.

“Man, it's kind of hot today.”

It seemed brighter than usual. I was starting to sweat as I wandered around the yard. I wiped it away on my sleeves, looking around for the little lizardman (lizardgirl?). And then I spotted her, crawling around on the ground with her back to me.

I stopped. It looked like she was digging in the dirt.

Perfect.

“Man'ya...” I called. With a strangely lethargic movement, she raised her head, then turned toward me.

Keep the initiative...!

Ready to pull my hand back in a hurry if she looked like biting me, I held the fruit out to her. I pinched it between my fingers so that even if she dove for me, she would get the fruit first. (Though there was always the possibility she would ignore the fruit and just bite my hand from the side. Then it would all have been for nothing.)

“Here, this is for you.” I could feel my heart rate increasing, but I kept hoping for the best as I waited for a reaction.

Man'ya stared fixedly at the fruit in my fingers. And then, suddenly... she swooned.

“Whoa!” Wary of being bitten, I reached out too late. Man'ya

simply toppled to the ground. She didn't fall—it was almost like she had gone unconscious.

“Man'ya?!”

I looked at the child splayed on the ground, then pitched my fruit aside and reached out to her with both hands. That was normally the instant I would have been bitten, but now there was no sign of an attack. She was eerily still, and when I touched her, her scales, normally chilly, felt weirdly warm to the touch. In fact, they were hot.

I picked up Man'ya in my arms, then set off for the mansion as fast as I could. For a child, she was quite a load to carry. But she was completely limp; she didn't move a muscle.



“I wonder what could be wrong with her...” Minori-san said, looking down at Man'ya where she lay on my bedroom floor.

In addition to my bodyguard, Myusel, Elvia, and Hikaru-san were all packed into my room—in other words, everyone in the house except Brooke and Cerise.

It was Minori-san who had helped make Man'ya comfortable when I brought her in, and Myusel who had brought the damp towel now resting on the child's forehead. We had put her on the bed at first, but Hikaru-san had hit on the idea that if she had a fever, the floor might be better, since warm air rises. And it was true that Brooke's little house didn't have anything like a sofa or bed, just rush mats on the floor. Maybe direct contact with the ground or the earth was best for lizardmen.

But now we had done all we could. Man'ya was a lizardman, a very different kind of creature from any of the rest of us. Even Elvia, as a fellow mammal, was probably more like us humans than Man'ya was. We couldn't even begin to guess how to care for her. We didn't know what kind of medicine might work on a lizardman, or for that matter, if human medicines were even safe for them—especially for one not even a month old.

“What do elves and werewolves do when they get a fever?” Minori-san asked.

“Same thing as humans,” Elvia said, looking worried. “Sleep it off...”

Well, that made sense.

“But lizardmen... I'm sorry, I just don't know,” Myusel said. “They were attached to a different unit in the army, so I didn't serve with them...”

Before Myusel had become a maid, she had served in the army in order to earn her citizenship in the Empire. Thanks to her training,

she knew basic first aid, and even, I was told, a magic spell for simple healing. The lizardmen, though, had been in a different unit—only natural, considering their distinctive physical capabilities—and I’m sure she had never encountered one with a fever.

Brooke and Cerise wouldn’t be back until the next morning.

“I’ll try contacting the garrison. Maybe they can work the lizardman network,” Minori-san said, and left the room. Obviously, Brooke wasn’t the only lizardman in the imperial capital of Marinos. If we could get in touch with the others, they might be able to tell us what was wrong, or even what to do about it.

“I’m going to go try to catch a few winks,” Hikaru-san said, also making to leave. “I’m sure you’ll need someone to take over nursing duties later.”

“I’ll go see if I can’t find a lizardman around, too!” Elvia exclaimed, and rushed out.

It was probably the right thing to do; neither of them could do much good just standing around here. Finally, even Myusel left to go get more cold water. Man’ya and I were alone in the room.

I gazed at the child. She looked so small lying there on the floor. Of course she did—she *was* small. A lizardman she might be, but she was still a child. A newborn.

“This sucks...”

This tiny child was suffering, and there was nothing I could do. I slid down beside Man’ya on the floor and just looked at her. She was breathing, but her eyes were still closed. At this point, I almost would have been happy for her to jump up and bite me, I was so desperate to see her move.

I was just letting out a sigh when I heard a hesitant squeak of the door opening.

“Shinichi-sama, it’s Myusel. I’m coming in.”

I sat up as Myusel entered the room, using the backup key she carried to get past the magical lock. She had a small bucket in one hand.

“I brought water. We should probably refresh the towel once in a while.”

“Good idea. Thanks.”

Myusel came over beside me and set the bucket down. “Man’ya-chan, is she...?”

“Not looking any better. It looks so hard on her.”

“Oh...” Myusel looked down mournfully at Man’ya, who was breathing painfully. “Um, ahem, Shinichi-sama?”

“Yeah?”

“I can look after Man’ya-chan, so you...” She seemed to want to tell me to go to another room and get some rest.

“Thanks... But it’s all right. I’ll keep an eye on her.” I smiled sadly.

“.....u...?”

Man’ya’s eyes, shut tight until that moment, drifted open a little.

“Man’ya?” I got down on my hands and knees to look in her face. She seemed to be regaining consciousness; her head turned lazily to look at me. The towel on her forehead slid off. I reflexively reached out to grab it—

“Hrgh?!”

—and Man’ya clamped onto my hand.

“Shinichi-sama?!” Almost on instinct, Myusel tried to break in between me and the child, but I waved my free hand to say, *No, it’s all right.*

“Shinichi-sama...”

“It doesn’t hurt,” I said, not to Myusel so much as to Man’ya.

Maybe it was the fever, but her bite was awfully weak. It wasn’t like it didn’t hurt at all, but it was totally bearable. In fact, I was almost overjoyed to see her chomp on my hand.

Man’ya looked up at me, her jaws still locked around my fingers.

“That’s right,” I said softly. “It doesn’t hurt at all.” With my other hand, I patted her on the head.

She didn’t make a sound, just let go of me. I felt the tiny teeth release my fingers, but Man’ya didn’t spit my hand out of her mouth. Instead, she licked it gently with her ribbon of a tongue.

I wondered what I tasted like.

After a while, Man’ya simply fell asleep, my hand still resting between her jaws. I turned to Myusel. “I know you’ve got a lot to do, Myusel,” I said. “I’ll shout if I need any help. Don’t worry.”

“Yes, sir. But please *do* call me, if anything happens.”

“I will.” I nodded and dunked the towel in the bucket Myusel had brought.



It might’ve sounded good, but I guess I fell asleep practically the moment Myusel left. When Hikaru-san had come to trade places with me yesterday, I had told him I would be fine watching over the baby, but I guess I dozed off lying next to Man’ya. And I had been so sure I would never fall asleep on the cold, hard floor.

“Uuuumm.....” I blinked. The last thing I remembered before dropping off was Man’ya’s face, just across from mine. She had opened her eyes while she sucked on my fingers, but then she had gone back to sleep. Not wanting to wake her up, I’d just dozed right alongside her, my hand still in her mouth.

“Man’ya?”

All I saw in front of me now, though, was empty floor. Man'ya was nowhere to be seen. Even the memory of the feeling of her tongue lapping at my fingertips was gone.

"Wh-Where's Man'ya?!" I felt the blood drain from my face.

Man'ya was gone. Had something happened while I slept? Where could she have gone, still in a torpor from her fever? I seriously doubted she was up walking around...

"What are we gonna do?" I sat up quickly, looking around the room—and froze.

There was Man'ya in a corner. But she...

"Man'ya...!"

I rushed over to her. She was facing the wall, and had rolled up into a ball so I couldn't see her face. But I could see a wound of some kind, a big one right on her head. She must have gotten up and about while I was sleeping and ended up hurting herself.

Talk about a screwup...!

I touched Man'ya—and she promptly squished.

"Wha? *What...*?" I cried. Man'ya deflated like a balloon with the air let out. She had already seemed pretty sick, but now she looked like a frog that had tried and failed to cross the road. What had I—

"Wait..." Then it started to dawn on me. "Skin...?"

"Ugi?" She had arrived beside me without my noticing it—Man'ya, who now cocked her head curiously at me.

"Man'ya?! But how? Oh, I see..." What I had rushed over to had been nothing but Man'ya's old skin. Man'ya hadn't been inside it all. She had probably been on the other side of the bed or something. It was simple: she had shed her skin. And she had done it so neatly that it seemed to leave a duplicate of her. That wound in her head must have been where she had crawled out of the old skin.

"Ahhhh..." I sat down right where I was, weak with relief. Man'ya was still looking at me.

"Man'ya," I said.

"U?"

"How's your fever?"

"Gi?"

She tilted her head again as if to say she didn't understand. But I assumed her fever had broken. In fact, she gave a very relaxed-looking yawn. At least she didn't seem to be in distress anymore.

"Thank goodness..." I said. Then there was a knock at the door. I went over and opened it to find Myusel standing there, with Brooke and Cerise. She must have brought them straight here when they got back.

"Shinichi-sama, how's Man'ya-chan?" Myusel asked, worried.

"Oh, about her—"

“*Emokureu!*” Man’ya squeaked, poking her head out from near my feet. (That meant “Welcome home,” by the way.)

“Man’ya-chan?” Myusel said, startled to see the child in such good spirits.

“Uh, Brooke, Cerise, can I talk to you for a minute?” I gave Man’ya to Myusel and ushered them all into the room, where I showed them the flattened duplicate of the child.

“My goodness,” Myusel said.

“This isn’t some kind of illness, is it?” I asked.

“No sir, just some shed skin.”

“But it came off so neatly,” Cerise said.

“So she wasn’t sick after all. I’m so glad...” My shoulders slumped with relief.

Reptiles shed their skin. Obvious enough—but I had never seen a lizardman do it, and didn’t know what the skin looked like after it was shed. I had no idea if any of this was normal.

“Our apologies, Master. ’Tis at about this time when lizardmen children first shed their skin. ’Tis a perfectly normal event for us, and we simply forgot to tell you about it.” Brooke bowed his head.

“Aw, hey, don’t worry about it. I should have thought to ask.”

“So do lizardmen always get a fever when they shed their skins?” asked Myusel, who was still holding Man’ya.

“No, certainly not always,” Cerise answered. “But it’s possible she was having trouble regulating her body temperature.”

“How’s that?”

“Very young children sometimes aren’t good at storing up heat.”

You’re probably familiar with so-called warm-blooded and cold-blooded animals. Warm-blooded animals, like us mammals, can make their own heat to make sure their body stays the right temperature. Cold-blooded animals (snakes and lizards being the best known representatives), on the other hand, are more strongly influenced by outside air temperature, and their body temperatures can fluctuate significantly.

That doesn’t mean, though, that a reptile’s body temperature is always equal to the external temperature. Even cold-blooded animals need heat sometimes. The chemical reactions in their bodies are most likely influenced by their temperature. If they want to move fast, for example, they would need enough chemical reactions for their muscles to respond, and for that, you need a certain amount of heat.

So when snakes and lizards and the like sit out in the sun, they’re storing up heat, after which they will frequently start to move. If they get too cold, all the chemical reactions in their bodies slow down, and they lose the ability to move. In extreme cases, they can even just freeze in place and die, sort of like hibernation gone terribly wrong.

That much I knew from books. But lizardmen weren't in any of my reading. Maybe the sunlight that had caused Man'ya's egg to hatch prematurely had also left her with plenty of stored-up heat. That could have thrown off her metabolism, so to speak, and caused her to release a lot of heat when she shed her skin. That was the theory, anyway. Or maybe she was just getting rid of unnecessary, excess heat as she shed her skin.

"Now that you mention it, I do remember the sun being especially hot yesterday," Myusel said, nodding.

"I'm just happy she's all right," I said. "I was going crazy with worry..."

"Y' have our most heartfelt thanks, Master," Brooke said, bowing deeply to me.

Cerise, after a glance at Myusel, likewise bowed her head. "We're told that you were with her the entire time," she said to me. Myusel must have told them.

"Aw, I really didn't do anything. Man'ya beat that fever by herself." Heck, I'd fallen asleep halfway through. "Come on, don't bow to me," I urged them. Then I looked over at Man'ya. She was reclining happily in Myusel's arms. She looked like the picture of health, like nothing had happened. "Talk about a relief," I smiled, reaching out to pat Man'ya on the head.

At which point the child latched her jaws onto my fingers. Yep. She was back to her old self.

"Hey!" Brooke reached out in a panic.

But I said, "Don't worry, Brooke, it's okay."

It wasn't exactly that I *wanted* to be bitten, but it was just such a relief.

Hang on... It... doesn't hurt?

"Man'ya...?" I said, and she pulled her mouth away from my hand. Once again, she started licking my fingers with that long, snakelike tongue.

Wow! I marveled at how much I had leveled up in just a day!

"Man'ya learned a new skill: Nibble!"

I was very, very pleased. Then came a sound that made my eyes go wide.

"Shii-ichi."

"H-Hey! That was my name!"

"Yes, I heard it, too!" Myusel said. We looked at each other, and I clenched a fist in triumph. There was no mistaking it: Man'ya had said my name. I guess I had finally graduated from being "*raemu*" to being a friend.

"She's finally started to understand how kind you are, Shinichi-sama," Myusel said.

“Wow...” This was hard to process. I was so happy. Excuse me, I think I have something in my eye...!

Brooke, however, sounded less thrilled. “He’s our honored master,” he admonished his daughter. “You must not address him by his name alone.”

Aw, c’mom, she’s just a kid!

“It’s all right, Brooke.”

“No, Master, I can’t allow—”

“Seriously, it’s fine. Man’ya isn’t technically my servant, anyway.” I gave her another pat on the head.

“Gyu.”

This time the lizardman girl didn’t bite me at all, but offered a friendly gurgle.



Two days later, the other eggs had finally hatched, and our house was pretty lively.

“Gyu!”

“Gyu?”

The newborns toddled around the yard, dug in the ground looking for bugs, and wrestled with each other. They all seemed to be having a good time. It turns out race or species or whatever doesn’t matter: watching chubby, short-limbed children play is adorable no matter who you are.

“We’re so sorry about all the noise,” Brooke and Cerise said, bowing their heads. I guess most lizardman children weren’t this active. Considering that Man’ya had been the same way, maybe it was because the mansion was situated a little bit closer to sea level than the lizardmen’s reservation, meaning the temperature was a little higher on average. Some extra warmth and plenty of oxygen would make just about any living creature outgoing. Anyway, it was just a theory. And it didn’t really matter.

“It’s all good,” I said. “I’m just glad they’re happy and healthy.” The rest of us were watching the children play, smiles on our faces. “Speaking of which, where’s Man’ya?” I didn’t see her among the rowdy, excited kids.

“I suppose she might be playing in the yard somewhere, like she usually does,” Cerise replied.

I glanced around for any sign of her, and meanwhile the other kids came trundling over to us as if to say, *Play with us!*

“Oh—!”

“Grr!”

Some of them grabbed on to the hem of Myusel’s skirt, while

another took an interest in Elvia's tail. One tried to get Minori-san to pick it up, while another babbled at Hikaru-san in incomprehensible baby talk. Brooke and Cerise tried to keep them under control, but there were only two of them to deal with five separate children. Each of the others found themselves with a kid to entertain, and even if they didn't always seem quite sure what they were doing, they seemed to enjoy doing it. Hikaru-san, in particular, seemed to have it a bit rough, his Gothic-Loli dress getting pulled and tugged from every direction.

"We'll make it clear to them they're not to interfere with your work," Cerise said. I nodded, just as one of the kids came wandering toward me.

"Ugi?" The child stared me down with an expression that made me think of Man'ya when she had just been hatched.

I smiled at the baby, crouching down. "What's up?" I reached out to pat it on the head...

"Gyu!"

Chomp.

"Eeyow!" I cried as the child munched on my fingers.

Myusel looked over when I shouted. "Shi-Shinichi-sama?!"

At the exact same time:

"Ugi!"

"Oo!"

The kids babbled and squeaked and all started piling over toward me. Before their parents could stop them, they started biting my arms and legs.

"Ouch! Agh! Wh-Why?! Why me?!" Why didn't anyone else ever get bitten?!

"Stop that right now!" Cerise started pulling the children off me, passing them to Myusel, Elvia, and Minori-san in turn. The kids, for whatever reason, sat placidly in their arms, with no sign at all of imminent chomping.

"Guess Man'ya isn't the only one who sees you as prey," Hikaru-san said, crossing his arms.

Minori-san, hugging one of the children, smiled a little. "It is strange."

"I wonder if I, like, emit something that makes them think of me as food."

"What?! You mean like a slutty-bottom pheromone...?!"

"No, I don't! This isn't BL! They're just *straight* up eating me! Anyway, forget the banter and help me!" Wasn't she supposed to be my bodyguard?!

"M-Master, I—I will take responsibility in place of my children...!"

In stark contrast to me and Minori-san, who weren't really worried

about the situation, Brooke had managed to produce a scythe from God knew where and was preparing to amputate an arm. Myusel and Elvia hurriedly stopped him. But there was still one question in my mind...

“Why am *I* the only one?!”

I now had bite marks all over my body. I was starting to think I knew how a cow felt after it had been attacked by a school of piranhas. I could hardly tear them away; I was standing there with brimming eyes, trying to bear it, when:

“*Tontosamu!*” someone commanded. That meant basically, “Don’t do that!”

Something came darting out of the nearby bushes, stopping in front of me. It was—

“Man’ya...”

The little girl who had been playing somewhere in the yard.

“*Echibu tontosamu!*” Don’t bite him!

Man’ya looked at each of the babies clamped onto me and repeated the instruction. It took a few tries, but she must have gotten through to them, because the tiny fangs let me go.

“Wow...”

All we could do was watch in amazement. I had heard of the same sort of thing happening with human children—infants communicating with each other in ways adults couldn’t seem to understand. Some people even claimed that if you asked a slightly older child to “interpret”—say, a two-year-old, someone who had started to talk a little—that they would tell you the infant could remember being in its mother’s womb, or even recall things from his past life.

Well, I didn’t know how true any of that was. But in any case, Man’ya certainly seemed to be able to connect with her siblings somehow. She huffed in satisfaction as the other babies dropped away from me. I still didn’t know much about lizardman expressions—even on infants—but I took her current look to be one of joy.

“Aw, who’s the best big sister?” Minori-san cooed.

Ahh, so that was it: she was scolding her little brothers and sisters on my behalf.

“I’ve got to admit, Shinichi-san, you’re a force to be reckoned with,” Hikaru-san said, sounding impressed. “To bring even Man’ya into your fold... You’ve got no boundaries when it comes to girls, do you?”

“I’m sorry, *what?!?*” How did he get to that conclusion?! And why were Myusel, Elvia, and Minori-san all nodding?! Okay, so maybe when it came to Myusel and the others I had no excuse, but that hadn’t been on purpose! And I want to be completely clear: I have never, ever, in my whole life, ever had any of *those* kinds of feelings

for a little kid! Anyway, she was a lizardman, for crying out loud! I guess dragons had become a fetish in America, but I was Japanese! And did we have to have this conversation right in front of the kid's parents?!

"Hrrm..." Brooke let out a breath, as if he were making his peace with something. "W-Well, *you*, Master, I might allow..."

"Stop right there, Brooke!" I didn't need that kind of loyalty! Not to be rude to Brooke and his kind or anything, but lizardmen were 100%, completely, totally outside the scope of my interests!

"Gyuuu!" While the rest of us had this completely ridiculous conversation, Man'ya was running and playing with her brothers and sisters, keeping an eye on them for us. She seemed to be giving them occasional pointers about what was okay and what wasn't. It was weirdly wonderful to see this kid, who had been just an infant herself hardly a few days ago, act like a responsible older sibling. We watched Man'ya and the others all the way until it was time to leave for school, enjoying the sweetness and savoring the peace.

Chapter Three

Toransusekusharu?



Chapter 3: Toransusekusharu?

The Guld Workshop: I doubt there's an inhabitant of the Holy Eldant Empire who doesn't know that name. Adults would be familiar with them, obviously, but even young children have probably been playing with toys bearing the brand of the Guld Workshop since before they could remember. There are a few other workshops in the capital, Marinos, but none as big as Guld. There are probably none bigger in the whole Empire—maybe not even in the surrounding countries.

“Workshop” may sound like a simple enough word, but this place got its start among the ore mines of northern Marinos, connecting the various dig sites with pathways until they formed a vast underground space. It's not just a mine or a fabrication project, either; the place includes everything its workers (most of whom are dwarves) might need in their day-to-day lives. Intensely aware—and intensely proud—of all the work that went into creating this place, we dwarves quietly refer to it as “Under-Marinos.” More than five thousand people staff the Guld Workshop. The majority of the twenty thousand dwarves who live in the imperial city are either employees of the workshop, or at least friends or family members.

All of this, obviously, gives the Guld Workshop production capacity of a different magnitude from other facilities. Toys; eating utensils and other daily necessities; artwork; swords, shields, and even more advanced weaponry: if it's fashioned with clay, hammered from metal, shaped from wood, or created with anything else that springs from the earth, Guld can make it. We grudgingly recognize the superiority of other craftsmen in just one respect: elves are more nimble workers of wood than we are. But even they use chisels and hammers produced by us.

And then there's the man who oversees the Guld Workshop and all that goes on within it, the one ultimately responsible for everything that happens there: me, Rydell Guld.

The Guld family were major movers behind the construction of the royal castle, and so we're accorded noble treatment despite being demi-humans. The workshop has been able to reach the extent it has thanks to the myriad rights and privileges granted to it by the Empire. It's worth knowing, though, that despite being treated like nobles, we have never been given a grant of land over which to rule by the imperial family, as a human noble would be—because no matter how

well they may be treated, no demi-human family, even the Guld, can possess a demesne.

Nonetheless, the Guld family has, in effect, been given complete control over the Guld Workshop—that is to say, virtually the entire northern stretch of the capital city and much of the nearby outskirts. An underground domain to do with as we see fit. Sometimes our continual expansion of the tunnels and pathways leads us to discover underground waterways or hot springs, giving the family a nice secondary source of income. Hence, the expansion of the underground reaches is another of our important responsibilities, quite apart from the everyday running of the workshop. Wider, deeper: we are always working to expand our holdings.

And thus:

“Boss!”

I turned, frowning at the figure who came jogging down the tunnel. “I told you to stop calling me that.”

“Right! Very sorry, boss.” My subordinate was sincerely contrite, but the old form of address was too thoroughly ingrained, and wouldn’t seem to go away. In my mind, “boss” had become outmoded; in imitation of the Amutech company, I had instructed that I was to be called “Manager.” But it wasn’t going very smoothly yet.

In any event. “Eh, forget it. What’s the matter? What’s going on?”

I thought I recognized the man as part of the tunneling team. If he had left the dig to seek me out, it meant they had come up against something the on-site team felt they couldn’t handle on their own. Had there been a cave-in or something?

We dwarves mostly used specialized magic in our tunneling projects, but even magic had its limitations, and it wasn’t uncommon to have to proceed by hand. Large-scale projects involving mountains and stone were one thing, but if you simply shoved softer earth aside with magic, then the moment the spell ran out, it would come crashing back down. It could even cause subsidence in the land above, and nobody wanted that.

All of which was to say that although tunneling work might be our bread and butter, it was more dangerous than it looked.

“We dug up something strange during the excavation,” my subordinate told me. He looked less panicked than he did simply perplexed. Apparently the situation wasn’t urgent.

“Did you, now?” I raised an eyebrow. A new vein of ore wouldn’t be described as being “dug up.” You would simply say you “found” it. And you certainly wouldn’t look so confused about it. I looked at the man, silently encouraging him to continue, but although his lips twitched under his mustache, he didn’t say another word. Perhaps whatever they had found was beyond the power of words to describe.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll come have a look.” I gave my subordinate a slap on the back and started down the tunnel.

Although parts of the dig site were reinforced with wire netting and steel supports, most of it was just exposed earth and rock, the floor and ceiling rough and unrefined. It wasn’t a proper passageway yet; still more of a hole. That meant both poor footing and poor air quality. The tunnel got narrower as I went along, until it would have been challenging for two or three to walk abreast. Weaving around mini-golems that were busy carrying soil and detritus away from the dig, I worked my way ever deeper into the tunnel. At last I arrived at a dead end, a wall of earth in front of which stood two members of the tunneling team. “I hear you’ve come up with something strange,” I said.

They turned to me. “Boss...”

“I told you not to call me that!”

“Sorry, boss—er, I mean... what was it again?”

“Ahh... Forget it,” I groaned, instead turning my attention to the object indicated by the two team members. It was in the shape of a box, seemingly made of metal. “What have we here?” I went over and looked at the thing where it sat on the ground.

It was long and narrow and stuck out towards us. If I had to describe it, I might say it was similar in shape to a coffin. And not one for a dwarf—more like for a human or an elf. But humans and elves usually made their coffins of wood, not metal. And then there were the perfect hexagons, each about the size of a grown-up’s palm, spaced at even intervals around the surface. Such a regular pattern rarely occurred naturally: this thing had been *built*.

“We just stumbled on it while we were digging,” one of the tunneling team members explained.

“Hmm?” As the other two looked on, I slowly, carefully rapped the surface with my fist. It was hard. And the sound—barely an echo. Whatever was in there, it was packed tight. There were streaks of dust caked on the surface, evidence of how long this thing had been buried here. Months, maybe, years. Still, the metal showed no sign of rusting. What could it be? I was starting to understand why my subordinate had found himself at a loss to describe it.

“Is this the only thing you found?” I asked.

“The only one here, sir. But next door, in tunnel Red 45, they came up with something else.”

“Next door...?” I frowned.

These tunnels, Red 37 and Red 45, were technically next to each other, but if one thought of them as city streets they would be two or three blocks apart. And yes, sometimes we found things from old ruins underground, including precious objects and even coffins. But to find

them simultaneously at such a remove—was it coincidence, or was there some sort of connection? I didn't have enough information to say.

"What should we do, sir?" The question came from the first subordinate who had come to get me.

"If these are relics of some kind, then we'll have to inform Minister Cordobal."

In principle, everything that could be found in the empire was the property of the empress. Even a noble's domain was, formally speaking, "on loan" from Her Majesty. But at the same time, anything discovered in the process of digging these tunnels belonged, for practical purposes, to the Guld Workshop. That included finds like this.

Anything that was readily identifiable, like ancient eating utensils or some commoner's ornaments, we were customarily free to do with as we pleased, to use it or sell it. The bureaucratic headache would just be too much otherwise, a fact the empire's administrators tacitly acknowledged when they chose to look the other way in these matters. But if this was a coffin, or something like it, it would feel wrong to simply try to profit from it.

"Get a golem and haul this thing out of here. And bring me some of the workers from the other passage."

"Sure thing, boss."

"And don't call me—ahh, forget it, just hurry!"



Eldant Castle. This building, which shared its name with the country as a whole, was the center of politics, economics, and culture in the Eldant Empire, not to mention a veritable symbol of the state itself. Created from a hollowed-out mountain, it redefined the word *massive*, and was in fact just about the biggest building we knew of here in this alternate world.

This being an empire, the castle was the home of the empress. A thriving castle town sprawled around it, and notwithstanding the nearly five thousand people who worked at the castle, as long as there wasn't some very special reason—like an enemy attack on the one hand, or a big festival on the other—commoners were very rarely permitted inside.

Needless to say, the first time I showed up for a visit, I was pretty nervous. The place was crawling with soldiers and knights, all carrying swords that I knew were perfectly real. And I knew they had a license to cut down any commoner who ticked them off. This was the first alternate world I'd ever visited, and I had no idea how to

speak the language or even what was polite or impolite—in short, I had no clue how to comport myself. Maybe I would unconsciously scratch my cheek in embarrassment and discover I had accidentally challenged some enraged other-worlder to a duel to the death.

With enough visits, though, my anxiety started to get better. It helped that I was learning what was considered common sense around here, including how to behave politely. As I got more comfortable, I started to be able to enjoy just walking around this humongous castle, which was like something out of a history book or a fantasy story. It was elegant and ornate, but this was no mock-up or movie set—this was the real thing. It wouldn't disappear just because nobody was looking at it.

There were the huge, prominent portrait paintings. The suits of armor that lined the hallways. Stone everything: stairs and walls and floors and ceilings. The lamps that burned here and there for light. And on and on. All of it real. A real, functioning castle. And I was in it!

I chewed over that fact as the knight of the royal guard led me down the hallway, just as usual. I wasn't alone, of course. I was with the other employees of our alternate-world general-entertainment company, Amutech. Kanou Shinichi-san, our general manager. And Koganuma Minori-san, military officer and bodyguard to me and Shinichi-san. The three of us were headed for an audience chamber.

"Amutech General Manager Kanou Shinichi-sama, accompanied by Ayasaki Hikaru-sama and Koganuma Minori-sama, has arrived," announced the knight standing guard by the doorway. Again, standard procedure.

We were in the smallest of the available audience chambers. This wasn't for official, public audiences with ministers and VIPs in attendance; it was for quiet, comparatively private—or even secret—conversations with Her Majesty the empress, when we didn't want too much of a, well, audience.

"So you are here." We all looked toward the source of the voice: the adorable, silver-haired Petralka an Eldant III (a.k.a. the empress) and her handsome, similarly silver-haired knight-attendant, Minister Garius en Cordobal. So far, everything was exactly the way it always was when we came to deliver our regular reports. We met with these two almost daily as representatives of Amutech, to let the empress know what the firm was up to. Although, to be honest, a lot of times we ended up just shooting the breeze.

But today was different.

"Romilda? Guld-san?" I heard Shinichi-san mumble.

Waiting for us in the audience chamber along with the two royals were a pair of dwarves, a father and daughter. Rydell and Romilda

Guld. Rydell was head of the biggest workshop in Marinos—named after his family—and Romilda was his daughter. She also attended the school Amutech ran. They both bowed to us and smiled.

“What’s going on?” Shinichi-san asked. We didn’t normally see Romilda and her father here in the smaller audience chamber—in fact, this was the first time. I’m sure Shinichi-san assumed there was some reason for it.

“Just listen to this, Shinichi-sensei!” Romilda exclaimed. “And you, Hikaru-sensei!” She was practically glowing. As a dwarf, she was what you might call vertically challenged, and it made her look much younger than she was. Her cherubic face and effusive behavior added to the impression of youth. “Our workshop found this weird thing and —”

“Romilda, we are in the royal presence. Be silent,” Rydell-san admonished her. He was a dwarf, too, but as a man, he had a stupendous beard and seemed as craggy as a cliffside. He might have been smaller than us, but his entire body rippled with muscles, making him an intimidating presence nonetheless.

“Oh, right...” Romilda, remembering herself, went quiet and glanced uneasily at the throne.

In actuality, this was hardly her first time meeting the empress by way of Amutech. She’d been involved with a movie we’d made and a backyard barbecue we’d had. Maybe it had all made her a little too cavalier about how she behaved in front of Her Majesty. For her part, though, the empress didn’t seem bothered; she showed no sign of anger, and even Minister Cordobal had a wry grin on his face. Romilda was evidently going to get away with her little faux pas.

“We suppose formal introductions are not necessary. More importantly, Shinichi, there is something which we wish you to see,” Her Majesty said. She pointed at something on a stand in the middle of the room: Romilda’s “weird thing.”

It was a metal box, about two meters long. The other two dimensions were, I guessed, about sixty centimeters each. It was just about big enough for a person to fit inside—in fact, it looked distinctly like a coffin. But it was covered in a pattern of hexagons; the whole thing looked almost... mechanical.

“Is it a coffin?” Shinichi-san asked, evidently thinking the same thing I was.

“I’m afraid to say we’re not entirely sure,” Minister Cordobal replied.

“As Romilda said, we know only that it was excavated by the Guld Workshop,” Her Majesty added. “And while it certainly has the dimensions of a coffin, we have never seen nor heard of a coffin with such a pattern on it before. And only this single one was found, all by

itself.”

Excavated. So it had been underground, apparently. It had, we were told, been discovered during tunnel excavations carried out by the workshop. Their first thought was that they had accidentally struck on a tomb of some sort, but there was no sign of any mausoleum, burial chamber, or grave goods anywhere to be found. It was always possible, of course, that the march of time had eroded the tomb and turned the grave goods to dust, or perhaps that everything had already been found and moved somewhere else. Whatever the story, it didn't change the fact that they had this one “coffin,” and nothing else.

“And the contents are stranger still.”

“Huh? Petralka, you guys opened it?” Shinichi-san said. He looked shocked. If this really was a coffin, then true enough, you might open it and be confronted with a mummy. Maybe it would just be ugly, but there was always the possibility of harmful dust or particles, or some unknown pathogen that had been locked away with the corpse and would sicken anyone who opened the coffin. Remember Tutankhamun's curse? The people who opened the tomb of the former Egyptian ruler died one by one, and it's been proposed that ancient bacteria or viruses were the reason. Of course, some people claimed the whole thing was a hoax, that the series of deaths hadn't really occurred at all.

But getting back on topic...

“What was in there? Was it an arm? It was an arm, wasn't it?”

“Why would it be just an arm?”

“Perhaps you had best open it and see for yourself,” Her Majesty said, gesturing at the box with her chin.

“Wha...?” Shinichi-san looked at me and Minori-san with trepidation. I think he was afraid there really was a body in there, and that it was going to burst out with a “Woo!” or a “Blargh!” or a “Together we travel the path of *meifumado!*” and attack him.

“Fine, I'll open it,” Minori-san said with a half-smile, and walked over to the box. I had a certain sympathy with Shinichi-san's reluctance, but the empress herself had told us to open the box, so we could hardly refuse. Among the hexagons, Minori-san located a small depression that looked like it was built to accommodate a person's hand. She grabbed hold of it with her fingers and slowly opened the box. Inside was...

“The heck is this?” Shinichi-san said, leaning over from next to Minori-san. I guess there was no dried-out corpse in there after all. But then, Shinichi-san had been wrong, too: there was more than just an arm in it.

The box was filled with something semitransparent. For a second, I

thought it was a liquid, but when Minori-san gently tapped the side of the “coffin,” it didn’t ripple. So was it something more viscous? A gel or a jelly or something? Then I took a good look, and saw something red, like a dried plum, floating in the center. The hazy quality of the gel or whatever it was made it hard to see any details of the thing, but it was a distinct shape within the amorphous gelatin, strangely dominating the scene.

“Guess it’s not just your average coffin,” I said.

“Mm,” Her Majesty concurred.

So what was it? I had to confess, I had no idea. This was a fantasy world; could it be a Slime’s coffin or something? To be fair, probably not.

“It does indeed seem like a coffin at first glance, but no one has proven remotely able to identify what is actually in it. Not even the dwarves in the Guld Workshop,” the empress said. Then she looked at Shinichi-san. “We wished to ask for your collective opinion.”

I guess Rydell-san and Romilda were there as representatives of the Guld Workshop.

“We have never seen its like here in our world, but we thought perhaps in your Ja-pan, you might have encountered it before,” Her Majesty said. “Or at least something like it.”

“Can’t say I have... I don’t think,” Shinichi-san said, cocking his head. He looked at us in turn. But we were just as perplexed as he was. Even the container itself was starting to look less like a coffin the more I looked at it. “I guess I’ve seen toys and food that sort of look a little like this goop, or that thing in there,” Shinichi-san said.

Heck, so had I—“slime” toys on the one hand, and dried plums on the other. But I highly doubted that was an actual dried plum in there. And the other stuff? It vaguely reminded me of something you might find in industrial manufacturing, but that was way over the head of a nonspecialist like me.

“Can you take this stuff out of here?” Shinichi-san wondered aloud.

“Remember what’s happened the *last* several times you touched something without knowing what it was?” I said, and he quickly pulled his hand back. We had no idea what that stuff might be, so I didn’t think we should be going around grabbing it. This might have been an alternate world, but our common sense should still have been functioning. Even if Shinichi-san’s seemed a bit numb.

“Mm, so none of you know anything about it, either...” Her Majesty pursed her lips. The adorable empress seemed to regard Shinichi-san uncommonly highly, but he was no scholar; he wasn’t even a fortune-teller or something. He could hardly be expected to guess what this goop was.

“Sorry we couldn’t help,” he said.

“No, we were simply curious. Do not let it bother you,” Her Majesty said, shaking her head. “The palace mages are prepared to conduct an investigation, and the Guld Workshop has offered to send researchers over to help. We were simply seeking any possible clue that might be had before we began.”

“All right, that’s a relief,” Shinichi-san said with a little shrug.

As for me, I took a fresh look at the stuff in the “coffin.” I stared at it as hard as I could, but it didn’t so much as move. Not the gelatin, not the little red ball suspended in it. They were just... there. As if time were somehow stopped inside that container. And yet...

I shivered. Somehow, to me, the stuff looked alive.



Class was over, and Romilda had invited us to come to the Guld Workshop. Mostly because Shinichi-san had hit on this idea that maybe if we saw the place where the “coffin” had been discovered, we might get some clue about what it was.

Normally, we might take what we referred to as a “bird-drawn carriage”—a carriage literally pulled by an ostrich-like avian—but with Romilda being what amounted to a dwarf princess, her favored mode of conveyance was a little different. Instead of a large bird, clay golems pulled the carriage along. In spirit, I guess it was similar to a rickshaw. Unlike a rickshaw, it had two rows of seats for up to six people, and the pullers were a pair of rough-hewn clay dolls, so the whole thing looked a little strange. Although no stranger, I guess, than an automobile from our world would’ve looked to the locals here, without anything at all to pull it along. Conversely, if you thought of the golems as like an engine, maybe it turned out this wasn’t so different after all.

“Boy. What *is* that thing, anyway?” Shinichi-san mused. The benches in the passenger compartment faced each other, and I was sitting beside Romilda, with Shinichi-san and Minori-san across from me.

“I guess it can’t be some kind of toy,” Minori-san replied. “I’ll bet it’s magical, though.”

“My father tells me it was the only one they found,” Romilda said.

“Huh? Weren’t you with them, Romilda?”

“No, not me. I’m not allowed where the tunneling team works—too dangerous, I’m told.” She started digging through a bag slung over her shoulder. “But sometimes they find the coolest stuff,” she grinned.

“Like what?”

“Like this,” she said and put a small, wooden box on her knees.

She opened the lid, and when I looked inside, I was surprised to find an assortment of rings and necklaces.

“What?” Shinichi-san said. “They found this while they were tunneling?”

“Yeah. Every once in a while, something like this will come up,” Romilda replied.

“Does, uh, does Petralka know about this? Isn’t this, like, treasure?”

“It looks pretty, but there’s a lot of fakes buried down there,” Romilda said.

The objects in the box were, it seemed, all imitations. What looked like jewels were simply glass beads, and what seemed like precious metals were only normal metals that had been specially treated. Overall, none of it was very valuable. For a while, it seems, a flood of objects like this had been found, and to save the empire the trouble of having to inspect each and every one of them, the dwarves were given special dispensation to dispose of anything that was obviously a fake.

“Although we do check them for magical properties,” Romilda added.

That made sense. Some items could have dangerous enchantments on them, not unlike the “forbidden armor” we had encountered, so the dwarves at least looked to make sure there was no magic on anything they found. And for better or for worse, nothing in this box had been enchanted.

“A lot of times these things just get thrown away, so if I see one I like, I ask to keep it,” Romilda said, trawling through the box with her fingers. “Ah, here we go.” She took something and held it out to me. “When I saw this, I thought it would be perfect for you, Hikaru-sensei.”

“Huh? For me...?”

I was a little taken aback. I was under the impression that Shinichi-san was the most popular teacher with the students, including Romilda. Not that I thought anyone hated me or anything, but I would have expected any gifts from the students to be directed at Shinichi-san. And yet here we were.

“What’s this—a choker?” I said. When I looked at it, I could see where she was coming from. It was a small strip of black material, like leather, with a metal clasp and a single turquoise stone carved with a geometric pattern. It was too small to be a belt; it had to be a bracelet or a choker of some kind. I had never known Shinichi-san to wear any kind of jewelry other than his interpreter ring, and black was definitely more my color—it would go perfectly with a Gothic-Lolita outfit. I guess that was why Romilda had wanted to give it to me.

“Can I really have it?”

“Of course!” she said, nodding eagerly. Maybe there was a touch of flattery in it, but knowing she thought it would look good on me personally felt pretty nice. I took the choker from Romilda and fit it around my neck.

It had a surprising heft in my hand—that stone was heavier than it looked—but when I put it on, I was struck by how little I noticed the weight. The clasp must have had magnetic stones in it, because the ends came together with an audible *click*, and it sat comfortably in place when I let go of it.

“It looks great!” Romilda said, clearly pleased to see her judgment vindicated.

“Wow, it really does,” Shinichi-san said.

“You wear that well,” Minori-san nodded. I actually found myself a little embarrassed to be on the receiving end of this shower of praise from my two colleagues.

“Thank you, Romilda,” I said, smiling at her. I brushed the choker with my finger.

“Young Miss, we’ve arrived.” Just at that moment, the bird-drawn—er, or rather, golem-drawn carriage—came to a stop, and the dwarf directing the golems from the driver’s seat alerted us in a low, rumbling voice that we had reached our destination.



We didn’t find any especially compelling clues at the Guld Workshop. The place was big enough that you could truthfully call it an underground city, but the spot where they found the “coffin” just looked like a dig site, rocks and dirt everywhere and not much else. We took some photos and videos and then decided to leave.

“Okay, see you later,” I said as we entered the house. No sooner had we gotten inside than we all went our separate ways, mostly to our rooms. As the head of Amutech’s school, I had to reorganize the teaching materials we’d used that day, record everything that needed to be recorded, and do other fiddly paperwork. By the time I was done with all that, Myusel would probably be calling us for dinner.

I pulled out my phone, checking some notes as I walked down the hall.

“Huh?” I could see something walking in the other direction, toward me. It was a basket so big you could barely get your arms around it, packed to overflowing with laundry. Talk about a bad center of gravity: the basket wobbled to the right, then to the left, looking like it might tumble over at any moment.

Obviously, I don’t mean a laundry basket had sprouted legs and started walking around. There was somebody holding it, somebody

coming this way. They must have just been to get the laundry. There were only a couple of people who handled the laundry around here—and from the pale, white legs I could see peeking out below the basket, I knew which of our maids it had to be.

“Myusel,” I said, coming to a halt, and the towering basket of laundry stopped, too.

“Shinichi-sama...” The person who peeked out from behind the basket was exactly the one I had imagined. She had flaxen hair tied in twintails, a headdress on her head, and she was overall completely beautiful. Her ears were pointed like an elf’s, but she was actually a half-elf, with one elven and one human parent. She was also our mansion’s maid, Myusel Fourant. “W-Welcome back—*welcome back?!’*”

She sounded a little bit panicked. Normally she would have met us at the front door, but I hadn’t seen her today. The trip to Guld Workshop had meant getting home a little later than usual, so I had assumed she was busy with some job. Apparently she had been collecting the laundry out behind the house, and hadn’t realized we’d gotten home.

“I’m so sorry, sir, I should have been there to greet youuuuaahhh!”

“Oh—!”

I don’t know if she tripped on something, or if she just lost her balance from that awkward position, but Myusel went falling on her bottom with a shout. The basket slipped out of her grasp, depositing its contents all over the hallway. Oh well... It happens. Around here, it happens more than you might think.



“Are you okay?” I asked, collecting some clothes as I worked my way over to Myusel.

“I’m sorry! I’m very sorry! I’ll clean this up right away!”

“Calm down, it’s all right,” I said with a grin as Myusel started grabbing clothing in a tizzy.

By and large, Myusel was a perfectly capable maid and a hard worker, but once in a while she would try to push herself just a little too far. In case you’re keeping track, this means that not only was she a half-elf *and* a maid-san, she was also an adorable klutz. If checking too many boxes on the moe list was an arrestable offense, Myusel would have been in jail a long time ago. Er, not that I know exactly who polices those sorts of things.

Anyway...

“I’ll help you,” I said.

“Thank you, sir...”

It was a familiar sort of conversation. I started collecting whatever was nearby, draping the clothes over my arm as I went. A towel, aprons that looked like they belonged to Myusel and Cerise-san, my T-shirts. I was going along, innocently grabbing whatever was within arm’s reach, when—

“Hrk—!”

Something came falling out from where it had been hiding under a towel, and I froze.

It was a piece of cloth, elegantly embroidered and covered in frills. It almost looked like some kind of 3D model: there was nothing inside the cloth, yet it ballooned out like a bowl, suggesting the shape it assumed when it was worn. A second piece of cloth just like it was attached to the first, with a cute little bow of red ribbon in the middle. The other side from the ribbon boasted a cloth belt and U-shaped clasps, matched by little hooks on the other side. It was completed by straps, if you will, that could rest over the wearer’s shoulders.

.....

Uhh, I guess this wasn’t the moment for detailed description.

It was—it was—it was—Ahhhhh, it was—!

“*Bravooooo!*”

No, wait, that wasn’t the word—*brassiere*...! That was it! I started to quake as I stood there holding the brassiere.

Okay, so, obviously, it wasn’t like I had never seen a bra before. Even the dollar stores and supermarkets sell ladies’ underwear in Japan, and I had seen mannequins wearing them plenty of times. And I had seen my mom’s and sister’s clothes drying on the wash line before. But those were all completely different from the article of underwear that was in my hand at this very moment. It didn’t belong to my family, and it wasn’t a never-worn display piece at the store. It

had, in fact, been in contact with the body of a girl I knew very well. In other words, me holding this bra was like—well, not an “indirect kiss,” but you get the ideaaaaaagh!!

Wait, hang on, I thought, coming back to my senses. *Who does this belong to?*

It was too small to be Elvia’s, and she tended to wear tube tops anyway, so the shoulder straps wouldn’t make any sense for her. And to be honest, I thought, neither would the little red ribbon.

This thing was clearly made in Japan. It had Japanese washing instructions on the tag. But it couldn’t belong to Minori-san, could it? Could she possibly squeeze that giant rack into something this size?

Then—Myusel? The size was about right, but I couldn’t quite imagine her with Japanese underwear. Of course, she could have asked Minori-san or someone to get it for her...

“...Oh.”

“Shinichi-sama...” Myusel’s voice snapped me back to reality. She had finished gathering up the rest of the laundry and was looking at me. Or more specifically, at the white brassiere that I was clutching.

“Oh! U-Uh, it’s not what it looks like, Myusel! You’ve got it all wrong!” I exclaimed. “I just happened to pick this up! I d-definitely wasn’t standing here thinking, *Gee, I wonder whose this is? Could it be Myusel’s? Could this bit of cloth have once been gently cupping Myusel’s chest? Woohoo!*, or any perverted stuff like that!” As excuses go, it was a rather revealing one. “I—I’m sorry! Don’t look at me like that! I just... I...!”

I seemed to keep digging myself in deeper. I mean, it wasn’t like I was planning to just stick it in my pocket and walk away. Really. I swear! It’s true! Please believe me!

“P-Please, Shinichi-sama, calm down.”

“But I’m *desperate* for you to believe me! I swear to God I didn’t have the slightest perverse motivation for picking this thing up!” I was a little crazed.

“No—listen—Shinichi-sama?”

“And I *even more* never thought of smelling it, or trying it on myself, or anything like that...! I’m not one of those freaks that gets all pant-pant over girls’ underwear, I mean, for starters, I think what’s inside it is so much better—no! That’s not what I mean at all!”

I was completely failing to talk my way out of this. Flubs left, right, and center. Arrrgh, stupid, stupid Shinichi!

“Erm... Shinichi-sama?”

“I—I —!”

“That belongs to... Hikaru-sama...”

“You’re right! I’m sure if Hikaru-san were here, he would be looking at me with utter contempt, total disdain, complete—what?” I

blinked and took another look at the bra in my hand. "It belongs to... Hikaru-san?"

"Yes, sir," Myusel said, nodding. She set the laundry basket on the floor, came over, and took the clothes I'd collected, along with the article of ladies' underwear. She calmly went back and returned them all to the basket. I watched her, sort of vacantly.

"So even his underwear is girls' clothing..." I mumbled.

There was a very long pause as I pictured Hikaru-san in my mind. I was aware he was very beautiful, so much so that if nobody told you, it would be easy to take him for a girl. From his long, black hair to his impeccable Gothic-Loli outfit, there was no flaw in his look: all of it suited him perfectly. But it hadn't even occurred to me that a predilection for wearing women's clothes would extend to his underwear. I did recall him and me hiding out in the backyard once in our underwear—or really, in some swimsuits—but that had been because Minori-san had gone mad from BL withdrawal. It wasn't anything from Hikaru-san's personal wardrobe. In fact, they had actually been men's competition swimsuits.

But this... Man, this was some commitment. Women's underwear. Typically, when you were cross-dressing or cosplaying, nobody saw your underwear. Unless you had some reason to assume somebody was going to see your delicates, why go out of your way to cross-dress that stuff, too? What if somebody put on women's underwear not because he expected anyone to see it, but just because he himself enjoyed dressing up as a woman? That would be understandable.

Hmm?

"Come to think of it, I never actually asked Hikaru-san," I mused. "Does he see himself as a man who enjoys wearing women's clothes? Or does he actually want to *be* a woman?"

"I believe he said once that he began doing it to make his parents happy, and simply continued," Myusel said thoughtfully.

"Oh yeah, I guess he did. But wearing women's underwear seems like a bit much if you're just doing it for appearances. Maybe it, like, started that way, but now it's something different."

"I wonder..."

"There's a lot of things I can't quite figure out about that guy," I said.

"What's up?" someone asked. It was Minori-san, who had appeared in the hallway. I guess if I had seen two people standing next to a huge basket of laundry and whispering with each other, I would have been curious, too. "Anything wrong?"

"No, not really wrong," I said with a half-smile. "I was just... wondering why Hikaru-san dresses as a girl."

"What, Hikaru-kun?"

“Uh-huh. Like, does he see himself as a guy who enjoys cross-dressing—almost like a sort of performance—or is it maybe something more? Like, you know... uhh...” I looked for the most delicate way to put it.

Minori-san, though, after blinking behind her glasses for a second, beat me to it, asking bluntly: “Is it gender dysphoria, you mean?”

“I guess. I mean, I’m not looking to diagnose him or something.” Hikaru-san could feel like or be whatever gender he wanted inside; it wouldn’t change anything. “I was just sort of curious about why.”

“Mmm,” Minori-san said, crossing her arms. I guess she hadn’t given it much thought, either. It just seemed that natural, or that typical, maybe, for Hikaru-san to wear girls’ clothes. We never even questioned it. “If it were just cross-dressing, I guess gender dysphoria might be a strong possibility. But he likes to cosplay as anime characters, too, right? Remember how he did Suiren?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah, I do.”

Back when he had first met Petralka, he had gone out of his way to cosplay as a character from *Rose Princess*, a show the empress had been obsessed with at the time.

“People cross-dress for cosplay all the time without having gender dysphoria,” Minori-san said. “I dress in guys’ clothes, myself.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. Minori-san, I was given to understand, had gravitated toward cosplaying male characters because of a sense her father would have accepted her more readily if she’d been a boy. But that wasn’t the same as wishing she could *be* a guy, and that wasn’t the vibe I got from her.

“Cosplay contests are a trip,” Minori-san told me. “You’re in the changing room with some cute young woman, and before your eyes she turns into a lady-killer of a guy. Or you glance in the men’s room as you go by, and everyone lined up along the wall looks like a woman.”

The idea of a men’s room full of women (even if they were just guys in costume) was so surreal it made me a little dizzy. So there were people in frilly dresses lined up at the urinals or something? It seemed like it would be chaos.

“Of course, they might be in character, but it doesn’t mean they want to *be* someone of the opposite sex necessarily,” Minori-san added.

“And I know there are some people who obviously do it for laughs,” I said. Overseas, I’d even heard of middle-aged men who dressed up like pretty-girl characters and paraded around. They were all smiles when they appeared in photographs. So did guys like that feel, inside, that they were actually women? Probably not, for the most part. More likely, they were just amused by the total disconnect

between the adorable costume and how they looked as men. The whole point was to dress in something that looked a little ridiculous.

"If you're really dedicated to getting the character, though, there are lots of things you can do. The perfectionists go to incredible lengths. I mean details you can't even see."

"Could that include underwear?"

"I guess for some people, maybe?" Minori-san said matter-of-factly. "There's plenty of places online where you can get women's underwear for men."

"So they *do* sell that kind of thing?"

"Sure they do. You can get padded bras to give yourself a decent bust, and even stuff for the lower half that, you know, hides what's down there. Ahh, I see what this is about." Minori-san seemed to have figured out why Myusel and I had been talking about Hikaru-san's cross-dressing. "He seems like the type who would be a stickler for details like that, doesn't he?"

"Okay then..."

"Only way to be sure would be to ask him, though."

"I was afraid of that."

"That's an awfully nice bra for someone who's just having fun with it, though," Minori-san remarked.

"Isn't it, though? I'm almost a little jealous," Myusel said, smiling shyly. I guess Hikaru-san made a pretty girl even from the perspective of an actual girl like Myusel.

.....Um. Hold on.

"I just had a thought," I said, looking at Minori-san. "If Hikaru-san is really just doing it because he enjoys looking like someone of the opposite sex, or putting on cute clothes or something, then what do you think would happen if he wound up in one of those plots like they're always doing in anime and manga and stuff? You know, 'I woke up one day and I was the opposite sex!' That sort of thing. You think he'd panic?"

"Hm?" Minori-san said, putting a thoughtful finger to her mouth.

Whoa, it's so cute the way she does that! I think it's against the rules to look that good doing that when you're over twenty already! I was starting to think Minori-san's insides didn't match her outside—but anyway, back to business.

"I don't know. I think Hikaru-kun is uncommonly easygoing."

"Yeah, fair point."

"Gotta say, though, Shinichi-kun, that's some imagination you've got."

"Nah, I was just reading something earlier with one of those stories in it."

This trope can take a couple of different forms: a guy can wake up

one day having turned into a girl, or a guy and a girl can swap bodies. To be fair, there might be a certain value in it: boys are interested in girls' bodies, and vice versa. But either experience would probably be a secret you'd carry with you to your grave.

"Um, I'm afraid I have to start making dinner," Myusel said, and excused herself from the conversation.

It wasn't like I had ever thought that hard about any of this, anyway. Minori-san and I parted ways, and I trotted after Myusel in case she needed help carrying the laundry. The talk turned to dinner, and five minutes later I had forgotten I was ever curious about Hikaru-san's cross-dressing.

It had truly been a passing thought, meaningless, going nowhere.

Certainly nothing that would have tipped me off to what was about to happen.

Nothing that would have made me imagine that the very next day, my hypothetical question would come true.



For a moment, my consciousness felt sort of... floaty.

My eyes drifted open.

"Mn..." A thin but welcoming shaft of sunlight came into my room through a crack between the curtains. I could hear a faint twittering of birds. The message was clear: morning was here.

"Mnnn..."

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, then gave a big stretch. I hardly remembered falling asleep. I recalled staying up late going over a list of stuff to be imported to Eldant in the near future.

Finally I opened my eyes, and was greeted by the sight of my familiar Gothic-Lolita dress. That's right—I'd been planning to catch a bath once I got to a good stopping point in my work. But first I had lain down on my bed to catch a quick wink—and everything after that was a blank. I must have fallen right to sleep. There were a few aspects of my Lolita outfits that bordered on feeling like bondage gear, like the exceptionally tight chest. It could be such a relief to take it off that sometimes I would just get very sleepy all of a sudden.

Come to think of it, I hadn't even removed the choker Romilda had given me the day before. But anyway, bath first. I would have to ask Brooke to heat the water. A wry smile came over my face as I looked at myself slumbering on the bed, not even under the covers, still in my dress.

"Huh...?" I felt myself tense with confusion.

There was Ayasaki Hikaru, sleeping peacefully on the bed in his Gothic-Lolita dress.

And here I was, lying next to him, buck naked.

.....

“Hrgh?!” I jolted upright. I, Ayasaki Hikaru, was definitely asleep. Thanks to my cosplaying, I spent plenty of time looking at myself in mirrors and taking selfies and stuff. A lot of people probably weren’t nearly as familiar with their own faces as I was, and maybe the reason it took me a second to register this bizarre turn of events was because I was so accustomed to seeing myself.

What turn of events *was* this? Was I dreaming? Having an out-of-body experience? These days, I lived in an alternate world full of elves and dwarves and lizardmen, where magic was an everyday thing. Maybe astral travel was totally normal, too. Maybe you could do it with magic or something.

I realized I was so confused I could hardly think straight. Almost unconsciously, I brushed my long hair out of my face, and the sensation alerted me that this was neither a dream nor a disembodied journey. Physical sensation was present and accounted for. Or was even that part of the illusion?

I looked down to take an inventory of my body.

“.....”

I felt my mind go blank. I was completely naked. And hey, that was fine. In a person’s own room, they can wear whatever they want—or don’t want, as the case may be. I seemed to remember some Greek myth about some guy who fell in love with himself when he saw his own face in a pool of water, but at least I didn’t have that problem.

Not normally, anyway. But...

“I... I can’t believe this...”

I was particular about my appearance, always making sure to attend to my hair and complexion. So it wasn’t the pale, healthy glow of my skin that surprised me. No, I was wondering why my chest seemed so... round.

I put a hand to my chest, discovering a slight but distinct weight. It was unmistakable. This was no illusion. Being seriously obese could produce that effect, of course, but it so happened that no other part of my body seemed so swollen. In fact, I looked exceptionally taut all over. Which all suggested one thing.

I sat and thought about it for a moment. I had a bad feeling about this. I know I dress in women’s clothes pretty much every day, but I am a man. I don’t wear women’s clothes out of some desire to deny that. I’m not interested in any sex-change surgery, and I still get perfectly excited if I see a naked woman. (At least if she’s my type.)

But anyway... After a long moment, I gathered my nerves and looked down. My gaze moved over the breasts... past my navel...

“Eeeeeeeek!”

A scream wrenched its way out of my lips. What should have been there... wasn't!

A wave of confusion swept over me as I sat there, confronted with this fact. I was sure it had been there as recently as yesterday. I mean, it was attached to me! And now there was no trace of it! In its place was a woman's—

“B-But *why*?!”

I was in a girl's body, all right. I just didn't have the faintest idea how I'd gotten there. It wasn't a dream. It wasn't an illusion. As hard as it was to accept, this was real.

“Hikaru-san, what's wrong?!” Someone was knocking urgently on my door, trying to ascertain what was happening to me. It was Shinichi-san. And I was sure he wasn't alone. I could hear someone else on the other side of the door, too. Myusel, probably. They must have heard my scream and wondered what was wrong.

Crap. That was my first thought. I hardly even knew what I was thinking it about.

“H-Hey... It's... n-n-n—”

I was in such a panic I could hardly talk.

I'm fine. That's all I had to say, but all I could manage were trembling syllables that could only make Shinichi-san and Myusel think something was *really* wrong. And Myusel had a spare key to every room. It seemed like only a matter of time until they came in to check on me. It should have been easy: I should have just exclaimed, “I'm fine!” or “Don't come in!” But all I could manage was inarticulate gibbering as they pushed open the door.

Not just pushed it open, either; the door flew inward, and in bounded Shinichi-san and Myusel, just as I'd expected. “Hikaru-san, what's... wrong.....”

Behind them, Minori-san and Elvia were there, too.

There was a short, heavy silence, and then Shinichi-san let out a single befuddled syllable.

“.....What?”

Myusel, Minori-san, and even Elvia were just standing there, saucer-eyed. Everyone was understandably shocked at my... nakedness.

“Hikaru.....san?”

“I think so,” I said, not feeling entirely sure myself. For the time being, I did the only thing I could do—arrange my hands to try to preserve my modesty.



The mansion was normally bright and full of life, but now it felt oddly... stifling. Anxious. Confused. Shaken. Maybe even a little panicked. Along with any other synonyms for “disturbed” you might come up with. Nobody knew exactly what was going on, but we were all very concerned about it. Including, of course, the person at the center of it all, namely me. But everyone else was so freaked out that I looked positively calm by comparison.

Sitting on the living room sofas were me, Shinichi-san, and Minori-san. Behind Shinichi-san and Minori-san stood Myusel, Brooke, and Cerise, collectively facing me. In other words, all eyes were on me. I found myself feeling a little uncomfortable. I tried to glance away from them, down to my knees, but then I couldn’t help noticing the bulge of my chest in my peripheral vision, and that made it all the more difficult to keep my composure. Outwardly, it didn’t look so different from when I was wearing padding, but wearing a brassiere that was actually touching my skin—it was, well, different. My intense awareness of the fact made it hard to ignore the swell. I had sure never expected that the women’s underwear I had might come in handy in this particular way.

While I had turned into a woman, on a positive note, I hadn’t gotten any taller, shorter, thinner, or fatter, so all my clothes still fit. That was a major relief. I mean, one way or another, I couldn’t go around naked all day.

Incidentally, on my left hand was an interpreter ring, swiped from my sleeping “self.” I felt a little bad stealing from him, but without it, I couldn’t hope to communicate with Myusel and the other Eldant people.

“Um, so. Hikaru-san, is that... really you?” Shinichi-san said, just to be sure.

“Yes, it’s me,” I nodded, at which Shinichi-san and Minori-san traded confused looks.

I understood—believe me, I did. For starters, the *man* they knew perfectly well as Ayasaki Hikaru was currently asleep on the bed in my—his?—room. From their perspective, he might be the real Hikaru, and I might be some kind of imposter, or maybe a joke in really bad taste.

And *was* I really Ayasaki Hikaru? Or was I someone else who was simply convinced they were Hikaru?

“I was like this when I woke up,” I insisted. It was all I could say.

“All right, well... mind if I ask you a few questions?” Shinichi-san said.

“Shoot,” I replied. I was just as eager as he was to know exactly who or what I was at this point. If it turned out I wasn’t Hikaru, then at least that would be something to go on. Better than having no idea

at all.

“Umm...”

“Describe Kanou Shinichi in one word.”

“Loser.”

While Shinichi-san dithered about what to ask first, Minori-san shot out ahead with an off-the-cuff request that I responded to completely on instinct.

“Sounds like the real Hikaru-kun to me.”

“What kind of question was that?!” Shinichi-san nearly exploded. But Minori-san just grinned, not a shadow of remorse on her face. “Shall I ask for more details?”

“.....No. That’s okay.” Shinichi-san wilted. He walked over to a corner of the room and faced the wall, from where we could hear him muttering, “What can you do?” and “I mean, me too, I...” Well, we could leave him to it.

After that, Minori-san peppered me with questions about various anime and manga, and I was able to answer them all fluently. When she asked me, finally, “What were you wearing the day you first met Her Majesty?” I immediately replied, “A Suiren costume.”

Minori-san nodded, satisfied that I was who I claimed to be.

“The other Hikaru-sama ain’t wakin’ up, though,” Elvia said, coming into the room.

Elvia Harneiman was our resident werewolf girl. The bushy tail and floppy ears proved it. When she wagged that tail like a happy puppy, you could practically feel your mood improving. But anyway...

“I tried shakin’ him, I tried ticklin’ him, but nothing works.”

Elvia had remained in my room to keep an eye on the sleeping “Hikaru,” just in case anything changed. Apparently she’d also tried to wake him up, to no avail. He was still breathing, though, so at least we knew he wasn’t dead.

This was making less sense by the moment.

“Does Eldant have some kind of magic that can turn a man into a woman overnight?” Shinichi-san asked.

“Not that I’ve ever heard of,” Myusel replied.

“Figures,” Shinichi-san said, and shrugged. I guess he was just asking to be sure. He didn’t think magic like that actually existed. Personally, I agreed. Anyway, I guess in this particular case, it would be “magic that can create an exact but opposite-gendered double of someone overnight.”

“How about an illness that might do this?” he ventured.

“No, I’ve never heard of that, either,” Myusel said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“So far we don’t even know if this just happened, or if it was somehow artificially induced,” Minori-san said, crossing her arms.

"It seems like a natural phenomenon to me," Shinichi-san said.

"I agree," Minori-san replied, "but if it isn't natural, then that means someone did it deliberately, right? Someone with a reason to want to turn Hikaru-kun into a woman."

"It—It wasn't me!" Shinichi-san said, maybe a bit *too* emphatically.

"And it certainly wasn't me," Minori-san said, much cooler.

"I mean, I admit Hikaru-san seems sort of wasted on the male gender."

"Dummy. It's perfect *because* he's a guy!"

"That's just your twisted view of things, Minori-san."

"Hmmm..."

"What's even weirder about this whole thing is that the guy Hikaru-san is still here, but now we have a girl Hikaru-san, too. Maybe someone does want to turn him into a girl for some reason, but why make a second one of him to do it?"

"That's a good point..."

The two of them both made concerned noises. Gender-change storylines aren't that uncommon in manga, anime, and games. It was a time-honored trope, in fact. But most of them also focused on the action: "suddenly, a guy becomes a girl!" Or vice versa. Most swept questions of why or how under the rug.

Whatever. The point was, we still had no idea why my consciousness had found itself in a woman's body.

"Oh..." Myusel said, looking at us.

"What is it, Myusel?"

"We have visitors... I'll go answer the door." She left the room. With her elf senses, she had much better hearing than any of us humans. I hadn't even noticed anything, but she had picked up on someone coming to the house—maybe she'd heard the carriage pulling up outside or something. But who could it be so early in the morning?

I was considering the possibilities when I noticed Elvia intently studying my face.

"What, have I got something in my teeth?" I asked, looking her in the eye, and she quickly shook her head, a bit chagrined.

"Uh, no, uh..." She couldn't quite seem to find the word at first, until finally she came out with: "I was just thinkin', boy or girl, you're awful pretty either way, Hikaru-sama."

I found myself at a loss for how to respond to that. I'd been hearing things like "He's so cute for a boy" or "He's too pretty to be a boy" ever since I could remember, so you wouldn't think this would have surprised me so much. But for some reason, Elvia's words really left an impression.

I blinked. Then I sighed. "Is this really the time for that?"

"Uh, oh, right. Sorry 'bout that." Elvia smiled, a little embarrassed, and scratched her head. She really didn't have much of a filter. I guess you could say she wore her heart on her sleeve in a big way.

"I'll grant, if one of us had to get turned into a girl, better me than Shinichi-san," I said, glancing at him. "He would probably be falling apart by now." Then there were the clothes to consider—and the underwear. At least I was ready to go with appropriate attire. "Or maybe he would do like those MCs in manga who get sex-swapped and check himself out in the mirror. Get all hot and bothered over his own naked body."

"I would *not*! Never! No way! ...Probably."

I wasn't sure about that last bit. Neither was Minori-san, who laughed; even I couldn't resist a bit of a smile.

At that moment, Myusel came back.

"Um, Shinichi-sama?"

"Yeah? Who was it, Myusel?"

"Um, yes, well... Her Majesty is here."

"What?!" Shinichi-san did a double take. Minori-san and I were as surprised as he was. It was true, the empress sometimes dodged her official duties long enough to come hang around with us, but she had never shown up so early in the morning. In fact, we usually went to see *her* before school. Was there some kind of emergency? I was still trying to figure it out when Her Majesty marched in, accompanied by her knight-bodyguards.

"Excuse us for arriving so early and so suddenly," she said, glancing around at us. "But something most serious has happened, and we wished to ensure you were all immediately informed."

"Something serious?" I asked on behalf of the group, as Myusel ushered the empress to a spot on the sofa.

"You remember the object you saw yesterday?"

"The coffin thing with the slime in it?"

"Indeed. When we inspected it this morning, the contents were missing."

"*What?!*" we exclaimed, and looked at each other. So that mysterious gel that had been in the "coffin" was gone? That meant somebody must have taken it, or else...

"We simply do not understand it," the empress said with a frown, her confusion evident on her face. Minister Cordobal wasn't with her this morning; I assumed he was busy investigating what had happened. If the thief had kept the goo somewhere in the castle, it would already be the crime of the century, but if they were out running around somewhere with it, then things would be even more complicated.

“I’m sorry to hear it, but why did you think we needed to know first thing?” I asked. This was clearly a big deal, of course, but surely we didn’t need to be among the first to be told. Heck, she could have just informed us when we showed up to make our report before school.

But Her Majesty replied, “Close inspection revealed damp tracks, as if the gel had crawled out of the container.”

“*Crawled* out?”

“It could perhaps have simply left a mark when it was removed by some thief, we supposed.”

True enough: some damp tracks weren’t enough to warrant the assumption that the gelatinous stuff was moving around under its own power. But Her Majesty told us that, while there hadn’t been anything to suggest anyone had entered the room where the coffin was being kept, more “tracks” were found in the crack between the door and the floor, as if the gel had slithered through.

“So maybe it really was a Slime?” Shinichi-san ventured.

“It is too early to come to that conclusion,” Her Majesty replied. “But it remains that traces of its movement were discovered. When we followed them, they appeared to lead in the direction of this mansion. There are a few other houses in this area. Provided the thing has not become lost in the woods, we fear it may have come to your residence, Shinichi.”

“Huh...” Shinichi-san nodded. “But we haven’t really seen anything unusual... I don’t think...” He looked around at us. No, we hadn’t seen any mysterious, autonomous gelatinous substances. It could be hiding somewhere, of course—it could probably expand and contract at will, the better to hide under a floor or behind a door. But if it was here, it hadn’t done us any harm yet.

“Very well, then,” Her Majesty said, obviously relieved. Then an edge entered her voice. “That being the case, Shinichi, we will proceed directly to Guld Workshop. You will come with us.”

“What? Why?”

“Because we have no other clues to that thing’s true identity.”

We had already been to the workshop the day before looking for clues, but Her Majesty thought we might have missed something, and wanted to look again. She also planned to talk to dwarves who had actually excavated the coffin.

“Uh, but we haven’t even had breakfast...”

“You will not die for lack of breakfast.” Her Majesty got up off the sofa and took Shinichi-san’s arm too firmly to be ignored. He definitely had a soft spot for the adorable tyrant, because he let himself be dragged out of the living room. Minori-san stood up, too.

“I’ll go, too. And Hikaru-kun, I think you’d better stay home from

school today.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a plan.” I didn’t think I would make it through anything like a normal day in this body.

“Hey, y’ think we should’ve mentioned the deal with Hikaru-sama to Her Majesty?” Elvia asked. The empress didn’t seem to have gotten the slightest inkling that I had turned into a girl. Maybe that was a measure of how convincing my daily appearance was. Would it be wrong of me to feel slightly pleased with myself?

“There’s no need to give her more to worry about,” Minori-san said, picking up her suitcase—the one with the 9mm machine gun in it. “Myusel, could you go to school today to fill in for Hikaru-kun?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. Oh, um, I’ll pack breakfast into bento boxes for you.” She hurried out of the room. She was sweet enough to envision everyone eating in the carriage on the way. She had used some breakfast ingredients in dinner the previous night, so she could slap them together with some bread to make a few meals in a pinch.

“Sorry. And thanks,” I said, bowing my head. Minori-san left, heading after Shinichi-san and Her Majesty. Elvia and I followed her out to the hallway and watched her go.



Breakfast involved those of us left in the house—me, Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise—eating what Myusel had prepared. Afterwards, it was business as usual. Brooke went to do the gardening, Cerise went to do some housework, and Elvia went back to her room. As for me, I found myself with some time on my hands, and eventually I just went back to my room, too.

I heaved a sigh as I settled into my space. Without Shinichi-san, Minori-san, or Myusel here, the mansion seemed awfully quiet. Brooke spent most of his time outside, and Cerise was doing some outdoor cleaning, so it was really just me and Elvia in the house at the moment. And with her cooped up in her room drawing most of the time, it was only natural for the place to seem kind of empty.

I finally picked up a novel I was in the middle of, but somehow it didn’t feel quite right, and before long I closed it again. I couldn’t seem to settle down. If it turned out I couldn’t go to school at all as long as I was in this body, then Myusel would have to fill in for me teaching. There were a few things I could do at home in my capacity as an Amutech employee, but to the extent Myusel was taking over my teaching duties, maybe I would have to take over her housework, at least some of it.

I let my eyes wander around as I thought, when suddenly I spotted the mirror on the wall, a full-length thing I’d brought from Japan. I

never left my room without checking myself in it. Any cosplay costume, not just a woman's outfit, is delicate: the illusion can be ruined by the smallest things. I wanted to make sure my hair looked right, obviously, but I also checked for any accessories out of place, the slightest trace of mustache, the quality of my skin, and anything else that could conceivably make people feel something was off. If anyone questioned what they were seeing, I had failed.

Therefore, any time I was going to go out in public, anywhere people might see me, I would always look at myself from a third-party perspective. It had been a habit of mine even back in Japan.

Now I looked at the mirror, and saw myself: Ayasaki Hikaru. At a quick glance, I was all I saw; I looked just like I always did when I was wearing women's clothing. But hiding beneath the outfit was an actual woman's body. When I stripped down to my underwear, that was readily apparent. Not just the bulge of my chest or the lack of a bulge between my legs, but more subtle things, too. Even the exact shape of my bones seemed ever so slightly different. When I looked back at my other self, the male body still sleeping on the bed, it brought home to me even more powerfully that I was in fact a woman now.

I don't mind saying that I was always confident in my ability to cross-dress convincingly. I worked hard to make my language gender-neutral, so I could seem more girlish, and I had always paid close attention to the curves of my body. You had to be more than just slim to be a believable girl; you had to be careful no one part of you got more muscled than it should. I was diligent about my makeup, of course, and I shaved my mustache fastidiously so the pores wouldn't open and show black.

And yet, for all that effort, when I was confronted with a real woman's body, it became glaringly obvious that I wasn't one. Take those curves, for example. Now that I had a woman's body, there was more plumpness—not fat, but everything, the chest naturally, but also my butt and thighs, my arms, and even my fingers, were more fleshy, without the hardness of muscle. I guess this is what it really meant to have soft skin. Honestly, as I ran my fingers along my arms, they felt nice even to me.

I stood there for a moment, massaging my arms. It probably would have looked pretty weird if there'd been anyone to see. But there wasn't; I was the only one there. Maybe this would be the perfect opportunity to get to know a woman's body, to learn something about them for future reference. It would make my costumes even better when I got back to my male body.

There was my swelling chest, the ultimate symbol of womanhood. There was the way the curve of my body puckered in slightly from just below my side down to my navel. And then, between my legs,

there was...

“.....”

It would be a lie, of course, to say I had never seen one before. Anyone who could do an internet search had a vast wealth of such things at their fingertips. You could even check out the videos on overseas websites, places where they didn't censor them like they do in Japan. I had seen my fair share, partly as research when I was trying to get my “look” right, and partly out of a more unabashedly animalistic interest. I was, as I think I've made clear, a man, with a man's desires.

So even though I knew I was looking at my own body, I couldn't keep my heart from picking up the pace when I saw all the gentle curves of my naked form.



Argh. I guess this means I can never laugh at Shinichi-san again. I reflexively looked at the floor, away from my mirror. But I could still see my own chest in my peripheral vision. I told myself not to pay any attention to it, but that was never going to happen.

“Huh...?”

It was in trying to look away from myself that I noticed it: situated in the cleft between my breasts, the smallest of red lights was shimmering. But it wasn’t coming from my skin. In fact, it seemed like it was emanating out from somewhere deep in my chest. As if something buried there were shining.

I took a step closer to the mirror, staring hard at the light in my chest. Whatever it was must have been shining pretty brightly to be visible through my skin; it looked like a sphere about the size of a golf ball. In fact, it looked oddly familiar.

“It’s from that coffin...”

Yes, that was it. The gelatin in that coffin-like container had had a similar small object floating in it. Obviously, I couldn’t see the pattern or color well enough to be sure it was exactly the same thing.

“What in the world...?”

What was going on here? I put a hand on the mirror, leaning my face as close as I could to the thing. Just then—

“Hikaru-sama!”

“Eeek?!” I shrieked as the door came flying open. “Wha—Wha—Wha—?”

I turned to find Elvia standing there. The easygoing beast girl wore the same innocent smile she always did. Leave it to her to come bursting into a person’s room without knocking and never realize she’d made a faux pas.

“Wh-What are you doing in here?”

“Huh? Oh, I just thought, hey, Hikaru-sama got turned into a girl. Wonder if he’s all right?” she answered brightly. She sounded completely sincere.

“No! I mean, what about the lock...?!”

When we closed our doors, a magical lock was activated that was supposed to make it impossible to open the door from the outside. At the very least, Elvia shouldn’t have been able to just come waltzing in.

“How did you get past the lock?” I exclaimed, meanwhile almost subconsciously moving my hands to cover myself. Elvia, seemingly oblivious, stared directly at me. Assaulted by a sudden wave of embarrassment, I twisted, trying to hide from her, attempting to make myself as small as possible.

“Oh, I borrowed the key from Myusel,” Elvia said, scratching her head shyly.

Ah, yes: Myusel had backup copies of all our keys, so we didn’t

have to go walking around with them. That helped reduce the risk of dropping them somewhere outside the mansion. It was all very logical.

Meanwhile, Minori-san, the Amutech bodyguard, was with Shinichi-san. Which meant at this moment, I had no one to keep me safe if the need arose—no one except Elvia. I guess Myusel had given her the key in part because she knew Elvia was my best ally under the circumstances.

“Okay, fine, but you shouldn’t just come bursting into a person’s room! Y-You could at least knock first!”

“Sorry ’bout that.” Elvia bowed her head, but she still didn’t seem to feel particularly guilty. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I reached desperately over to my bed, grabbing my clothes and holding them in front of me to cover myself.

I know, I know. Elvia didn’t mean any harm. In fact, as she herself said, she’d had my best interest at heart. But it was just tremendously embarrassing for anyone to know I’d been examining myself naked in the mirror. I couldn’t look at her. Did she think I was some kind of sex-crazed pervert now? Not to mention, I wasn’t wearing a thread of clothing, and I just didn’t want her to see me that way.

“A-Anyway, I’m gonna get dressed...” I said, trying to indicate that Elvia should step out of the room, when suddenly something occurred to me. I was a woman now. And so was Elvia. So actually, it was pretty strange to be acting all embarrassed. For that matter, if this body was just a construct—just something my soul had somehow been transferred into—then the real me was sleeping on that bed, which meant she wasn’t really seeing *me* naked at all. So why was I so embarrassed?

The entire thing was making my head spin.

“Er... Hikaru-sama?” Elvia was looking at my feet for some reason. “Have y’ been outside?”

“Huh? Outside?” Did she mean, since I got up this morning? “I don’t think so... why?”

“Your legs, they’re kinda dirty.”

At that, I looked down at my legs, and lo and behold, they were a little bit dirty. It looked like I had been running around in bare feet. I hadn’t left the house since I got up this morning. And I never went out of my way to go out without putting shoes on. So how had this happened?

“I guess I did go to bed without my bath last night...” I said, but that had been in the male body that was currently asleep on the bed. I was sure I hadn’t been in this woman’s form before I drifted off last night.

“Hikaru-sama?”

I was getting confused by the sheer number of unanswered questions. Elvia looked at me blankly. Then she looked at my feet again, smiled with almost blinding brightness, and said, "Let's hit the bath."

"Uhhh..." I hadn't expected that. She shuffled over to me where I stood, still frozen, and grabbed my hand. "E-Elvia?!"

"Nobody likes to go around dirty, right?"

"Well, I mean—yeep!" She hardly waited for me to respond before she started off, dragging me behind her. I had been in Elvia's arms once, as we jumped from a runaway carriage, and it had given me an appreciation for just how strong and powerful she was. With my weight, I don't think she knew I was there. If she really wanted to, she could probably tuck me under one arm and run away. All of which was to say, resistance was futile.

Still, I tried. "H-Hold on, Elvia! At least let me dress...!"

"We're goin' to the bath. You'd just have to undress again."

"Not the point..."

She smiled, but ignored me, as she half-dragged, half-carried me down the hallway.



As I expected, the Guld Workshop didn't yield much. We were able to talk personally with the dwarves who had dug up the "coffin," but it was the same story: they found it in a tunnel they'd been digging. In other words, they'd just been working on expansions when they happened to stumble across it, and they didn't know anything more than that.

They could tell us, though, that diggers in a neighboring tunnel had come up with several other objects at about the same time. They seemed to assume this was just coincidence, but I wondered if there might be a connection.

"Hmm..."

After our investigation at the workshop, we headed to school, but it wasn't for our normal classes. Well, for Myusel and Minori-san, it was, but Petralka and I had another goal in mind: we were going to see Romilda. She had already set off for school by the time we arrived at the workshop that morning, and we hadn't been able to talk to her. She hadn't been at the site when the coffin was discovered, but she had come with her father when he brought it to the castle. We wanted to know if she had noticed anything unusual at the time.

"Oh, there she is." It turned out it didn't take much searching to find her. She was chattering happily with her classmates, including some of the humans and elves. It hadn't been long ago that dwarves

would only talk with other dwarves, elves would only talk with other elves, and humans stuck with humans. But recently, those kinds of racial divisions had started to ease, and everyone was learning to get along. That made me really happy, and I was reluctant to interrupt the conversation, but unfortunately, today, I had little choice.

“Hey, Romilda, can I borrow you for a second?” I said, and led her out of the classroom to another, smaller room nearby, normally used for individual consultations with students or their families.

“What’s the matter, Shinichi-sensei?” Romilda asked, although she didn’t seem particularly ill at ease. Nonetheless, she stiffened when she saw Petralka—along with two armed bodyguards—waiting in the room. “Er, ahem—what’s going on, if I may ask...?”

“Petralka, I found her,” I said.

“Mm,” Petralka responded with a nod.

This was hardly the first time Romilda had met Petralka in person, of course, and although they could hardly be called close friends, Petralka would at least remember Romilda’s name and face. Still, Romilda had never sat down one-on-one with the empress before—there’d always been a sort of social cushion between them. Like me, or her father Rydell-san, or someone else to help mediate. Romilda was often sort of along for the ride.

“Shinichi-sensei... Your Majesty...?” She looked uneasily from me to Petralka and back. For better or for worse, Petralka looked very serious; she obviously wasn’t here for chitchat. It was clear to Romilda that she had been asked for by name, and she had to be worrying that the empress was mad at her or something.

“No need to look so stiff,” Petralka said. “We simply wish to ask you a few questions.”

“Yes’m...” Romilda nodded, not quite convinced, and I gave her the rundown. The missing stuff from inside the coffin. The tracks that led from the castle in the direction of my mansion. I told her we were just curious if she knew anything at all about the incident.

“That stuff was gone...?” Romilda said, blinking, her eyes as big as saucers. “You mean it... moved?”

“There is always the possibility that it was stolen. But from the evidence available, the material seems to have moved under its own power.”

“Did you notice anything unusual, Romilda? Anything at all?”

“I’m sorry, I really didn’t...” She shook her head.

“Okay, I see. Thanks,” I said, managing a smile.

The reality was that neither Petralka nor I had really expected to get anything enlightening out of Romilda. We were both grasping at every last possibility. But that being the case, we were left with nothing to go on. No clues. Why had the goo vanished? Where had it

gone? Petralka and I were just sharing a look and a sigh when Romilda said hesitantly, “Oh... Um, Shinichi-sensei...” It sounded like she had just had a thought.

“What’s up?” I said. Maybe she’d remembered something. I looked at her with hopeful eyes, but she said, “Where’s Hikaru-sensei today...?” So this wasn’t about the coffin goo at all.

“Er, uh, H-Hikaru-san? Him?” My voice almost betrayed me as I remembered the morning’s events—in particular, Hikaru-san’s complete nakedness, which I had definitely not intended or wanted to see.

“Hrm...?” Petralka watched me squirm for a second.

I cleared my throat, got my voice under control, and managed a reluctant smile as I said, “He’s not quite feeling himself today, so he decided to stay home...”

I could hardly tell them he wasn’t here because he’d woken up to discover he was a girl. Nope, no way I could say that. Even if it had been a total accident. I was just about to tell Romilda I would happily take any message she had for him, when she said, “Not quite himself...?” The blood drained from her face with alarming suddenness. Romilda was usually a pretty happy-go-lucky person (even if by the standards of, say, Elvia, she seemed downright subdued), and I’d never seen her look so concerned before.

“Um, yeah. Something the matter?”

“I... I’m afraid it might be my fault...!”

“Huh?” I frowned. That seemed to come out of left field. Romilda, though, looked like she might burst into tears. She said *might*, but it looked like in her mind there was hardly any doubt. “Why would it be your fault?” I asked.

“You know—because I gave Hikaru-sensei that choker yesterday!” she wailed. “It wasn’t found in the same place... But it was found on the same day...”

“You mean the same day as—”

“That coffin!”

Ahh. Yes, I remembered her saying that the choker was another item that had been dug up. I was pretty sure Hikaru-san—the male one, lying asleep on the bed—was still wearing it.

“But it *was* found in a different place, right? So it probably doesn’t have anything to do with—” Then I stopped. “Wait, hold on...” I was starting to sense a possibility. I was no geologist or anything, but... “What if there was a flood or something that knocked over a building, and scattered the contents all over?”

It wouldn’t all end up in the same place. It was possible that even things that had been stored in the same location could be washed dozens or hundreds of meters apart from each other, then later buried

by mud and silt. The two tunnels in question seemed like completely different places, but they had been going the same direction, at the same depth. Which meant maybe the layers of earth around them had been deposited at about the same time.

So what if that “coffin” and Hikaru-san’s choker had once been in the same place? Heck, what if they belonged together? It was a dizzying idea. But when two strange things happened at the same time, it was probably more logical to assume they were connected than that they weren’t. For example...

“You mean, like, maybe by putting on that choker, Hikaru-san awakened whatever was in that coffin...? And maybe he turned into a girl as a side effect? No, or maybe...”

“What? What are you talking about?” Petralka asked, furrowing her finely shaped eyebrows at me.

“I just thought of something,” I said, but Romilda didn’t look any less worried or Petralka any less perplexed.



...How had this happened? I tried to suppress a shiver as I watched the steam rise into the air. I struggled to grasp what was happening to me. Well, it should have been obvious; it was simple enough. I just couldn’t rationally accept it.

“Whassa matter, Hikaru-sama?” A cute face appeared right in front of me, sending ripples along the surface of the water I was currently submerged in. The short hair, the floppy ears, and the innocent smile made for the perfect image of a dog-like beast girl. The faint ridiculousness of what she did and said made her seem just like a big, sweet dog that had been aggressively anthropomorphized.

Everything below the neck looked properly like a wild animal, muscular limbs and taut body—except for the bust and behind, which had the perfect amount of swell. It was obviously a woman’s body. A woman’s *naked* body. And a well-endowed one at that.

“N-N-Nothing...!” I answered quickly. I looked away from her and tried to make some space between us.

“Hikaru-sama?” Elvia looked puzzled by my reaction. Geez, this girl was... *too* open. Or she had no shame or something. Yes, my body, or at least my legs, had been dirty, and she wasn’t wrong that I needed a bath. But there was no need for her to get in with me. After Elvia had dragged me, naked, relentlessly through the hallway, we’d arrived at the changing room, where she’d unhesitatingly torn off her own clothes and then pulled me straight into the bath. And so we found ourselves here.

I let out a long breath, trying to do anything I could to stave off

the rising heat in my body—not to mention my ever-increasing blood pressure as my heart got more and more out of control. For the time being, at least I could pretend my face was red because of the hot bath. Not that Elvia seemed to notice anyway.

“It’s nothing,” I repeated, and then sank down until I was submerged almost up to my nose.

My guess was that Elvia wasn’t even thinking of me as a man. She was never exactly shy about sex—maybe it had something to do with going into heat on a regular basis, the way beast people did—but she also had a deep-seated respect, almost reverence, for Shinichi-san. Her behavior towards him notwithstanding, I didn’t think she was so cavalier that she would go showing off her naked body to just any guy. That seemed evident enough just from watching her.

I paused. There was a sort of distant ache in my chest, almost a pain. Like if I didn’t take care to breathe deeply, I would run out of oxygen. My heart kept pounding away, and I started to feel like my face and body were even hotter than the water.

This body was really getting to be a lot of trouble. I couldn’t control it through sheer willpower anymore.

“Had a nice soak, Hikaru-sama?” Elvia asked, splashing in the water like a child.

“Er, yeah, I guess...”

“Great! Time to help you wash up, then!”

“Huh? No, you don’t have to—”

Washing, of course, was why we were in the bath in the first place. Actually, you were supposed to wash *before* you got in. But, reluctant to sit there naked in front of Elvia, I’d lunged for the tub as soon as we arrived.

“It’s like—I mean, it’s not that it isn’t a good idea, but—”

“They asked me to take care of you, Hikaru-sama,” Elvia said proudly.

“No, listen, I’m pretty sure they meant, like, as my *bodyguard*—”

“We’ll wash over there.” Then she dove underwater, leaving behind only a little bubble.

I was just thinking *Huh?* when I felt her grab hold of me, reservations and all.

“Hey—hold on—” I was so shaken that I could hardly get out more than a word or two. Aw, man. It turned out I was no better than Shinichi-san. Pathetic. The feeling of Elvia’s soft chest pressing against my midriff threw my entire mental system completely out of whack.

Elvia, seeming completely oblivious to my discombobulation, held me tight with both arms and lifted me easily out of the water. The closest thing I could do to fighting back was to kick helplessly at the air. But of course, it didn’t make any difference against the sheer

physical power of a werewolf.

“Okay, just sit right here.” Elvia plopped me happily onto a stool.

“F-Forget about it, okay, Elvia? I’ll do it myself!”

“Ya don’t have to worry so much! I’ll get you nice and clean!”

Whoever had trusted Elvia with me—Minori-san, Myusel, or Shinichi-san—she was obviously stoked about it. She had a huge grin on her face. I tried to stand up, and she easily pushed me back down with one hand, then grabbed a bar of soap and began lathering it between her palms.

“Elvia...?”

“Don’t fret, just stay right there,” she instructed, and then she set to scrubbing me—forgoing any kind of towel, using only her soap-bubble-covered hands. Maybe that’s just how she always used soap, but still...

“Hey...!” I said. I didn’t care what she had been told; this was too much. “Stop...”

“Don’t move,” she said. “Ya wouldn’t want to slip, would you?” Meanwhile, she kept sweeping her hands *all over* my body. I was basically getting a massage from a beautiful woman...

“Ahh... Oh...” I couldn’t prevent a moan from coming out my lips.

“Feels good, huh?”

“That’s not—”

Look, I know. I know Elvia didn’t mean anything by the question. That it was hardly different from a hairdresser who says “Let me know if the water’s too hot” when she’s washing your hair. So it would have been fine for me to just say, “Yeah, it feels nice.” But then... Then there were Elvia’s hands, running over my body among the suds. There was the way she braced herself against me so I wouldn’t fall off the stool, reaching around to soap me.

“You’re, uh, used to this, huh?”

“Yeah, I used to help Big Sis Ama and Big Sis Jiji get clean all the time when we were kids!”

“Oh, uh... Oh.”

That’s right—Elvia had two sisters, didn’t she?

In the end, I just let Elvia have her way with me, her hands going here, there, and everywhere, while I focused on trying not to make any embarrassing sounds. As for her, she was in such a good mood she was even humming a little tune. I didn’t recognize the melody—maybe it was from Bahairam. As far as she was concerned, the current situation wasn’t any stranger than being in the bath with one of her sisters.

And yet... And yet... Yes, I looked like a woman on the outside; at the moment, I lacked the organ that would have stood up and made my presence here inexcusable in a man’s body. But deep inside, I was

painfully aware of Elvia's nakedness, very much *as a man*. Elvia supposedly understood that awareness was there, yet she didn't show the slightest hesitation in getting in the bath together.

I'd heard about how Elvia had dragged Shinichi-san to the bath before, but that was supposedly because of something or other that happened to her on account of the moon or something. And she was crazy for Shinichi-san anyway. With me, it was different. I wondered what she really thought about all this.

"I'm surprised you decided to jump in the bath with me, Elvia," I mumbled.

"Huh?" She stopped scrubbing. "Somethin' the matter?"

"Well, I mean, it's just—I know I look like a woman and all, but... what's inside hasn't changed, you understand?"

I was a little reluctant to say it. After all, if she burst out, "Oh yeah, that's right!" and got upset, it would suck. But at the same time, I couldn't just let all this happen without at least trying to make sure we were on the same page. I needed to know what Elvia thought was going on when she hopped in the bath with female me.

"Oh yeah," she said. "I guess you're right." Completely matter-of-fact.

That put me on the back foot. I blinked. I was briefly tempted to look back and see what kind of expression was on her face, but I resisted the impulse. So I guess she really hadn't been thinking of me as a man. That made sense, I guess, but that recognition was mingled with a certain disappointment at her density—and in fact, for some reason, a certain disappointment in general. I wondered why.

As I struggled with feelings I myself didn't completely understand, Elvia let go of me, came around front, and started scrubbing again. I looked away from her, but forced a dry smile onto my face.

"So you're not like, *This is so weird!* or *You make me sick!* or something?"

"Not especially?" Elvia said, unconcerned. "Here, I'm gonna rinse you." Then, before I could rephrase my question, she dumped a bucket of water over my head, rinsing away all the soap bubbles.

"But why...?" Had I dressed as a girl so long that she just didn't feel funny around me now? Or could it be...

"Aren't ya just yourself, Hikaru-sama?"

"Wha...?"

"If what's inside you really hasn't changed even though you're in a girl's body, then you're Hikaru-sama, right? You don't make me sick."

She sounded as if all this were perfectly obvious to her. Me, I could sort of see it, but... I wasn't quite so sure.

At that moment, though, a series of memories flashed through my mind. I'd never had a very distinct sense of myself. People had often

said I wasn't a very needy child, but I think that was a misunderstanding. My desires were just very outwardly directed: I wanted to make people happy, I wanted them to recognize me, to praise me. I wanted them to *see* me.

I'd always had soft, girlish features, and my parents went through a phase where they'd dress me in girls' clothing, and then coo about how cute I was. I just couldn't get that time of my life out of my head, and started to think maybe that was what people really wanted from me. And if that was what everyone around me wanted, I had to rise to that expectation. It became my whole reason for being, or so I started to think.

The next thing I knew, I discovered I was someone constantly aware of the gaze of others, without a real self to call my own. I was, in a word, empty. I didn't have anything I could really argue passionately about, the way Shinichi-san defended a given anime or proudly got moe over a certain character. I didn't have an interest so all-consuming that it influenced the way I talked and acted, like Minori-san and her BL. Yeah, I was a bit of an otaku; I knew plenty about anime and manga and whatever else, but that was mostly to support my cosplay, or so I could drop relevant details in conversations with my otaku friends. It was totally superficial. Ayasaki Hikaru was like a balloon, floating along with nothing inside him.

That's why what Elvia said... I can't quite describe it, but it almost felt to me like some sort of forgiveness. Permission. *You are you. You're Ayasaki Hikaru, before you're anything else. And that's okay. That's good.* That was what it sounded like she was saying to me.

"And when I was fightin' with Myusel and Her Majesty, you took my side, Hikaru-sama."

"Well, I mean..."

Someone had to. Elvia had obviously been late to the battle for Shinichi-san's affections. Frankly it kind of ticked me off—it made me feel a little bad for her—that she was the one who most obviously had real romantic feelings for Shinichi-san, was the most aware of him as a member of the opposite sex, and yet he hardly seemed to notice her.

In some ways, Elvia and I were polar opposites. She was all innocence, with no secrets—everything she thought came right out her mouth. She could be a little bit of a klutz at times, but she threw herself into everything she did. She knew exactly who she was. Or at least, she looked like it to me. I could almost be jealous.

"Maybe it ain't a werewolf's place to say this, but..." Elvia smiled, almost shyly. "You're a real important friend to me, Hikaru-sama."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

"There, all clean," she said, rinsing the last of the bubbles from my body.

“Thank you, Elvia,” I said. And then I thought, if I were still in my male body, we would never have had the chance to talk like this. So, hey. Maybe it wasn’t *such* a bad thing, this turning into a girl. I smiled at myself, a bit.

I glanced down, toward my chest. The little red light there was flickering, as if keeping time with my pounding heart.



“So what you’re saying is... that stuff got out of the ‘coffin’ and turned into this body?”

Not long after I emerged from my bath, I was surprised to find Shinichi-san and the others already arriving home from school. Rather than heading for their own rooms like they usually did, though, they called everyone to the living room and presented their hypothesis. Specifically, that this female body of mine was created by that amorphous stuff from the coffin. If nothing else, it had the advantage of solving several mysteries at once, including where the goo had gone and why I was suddenly a girl.

“We don’t have any real proof, but Petralka’s at the castle now investigating the possibility,” Shinichi-san said.

“Huh, all right,” I answered, and nodded. Shinichi-san sort of blinked at me. “What?”

“You... don’t seem very surprised.”

“Oh,” I said with a bit of a smile. True, the idea might have been surprising, but I had already seen that light in my chest. It sure looked an awful lot like the red glow that had been floating in that gelatin. In fact, I had been thinking along lines not too different from Shinichi-san’s hypothesis myself.

“I’m kind of impressed, though,” Minori-san said. “Seeing that slime take on a form like this. If I didn’t know better, I might think it was a real human body.”

“It has the right body temperature, and the skin feels very human. Want to touch it?” I said, holding out a hand to Minori-san. She stopped for a second, startled—but then took my hand.

“Wow,” she said, “it does feel real.”

“How about you, Shinichi-san? Want to cop a feel? My chest is right here.”

“What?!”

I got his eyes to just about bug out of his head when I reached for the collar of my shirt. He knew, theoretically, that I was still a guy at heart, but he reacted to me just as if I was a girl, and the incongruity made me laugh.

“Quit it, I’m serious,” Shinichi-san said with a long sigh. He tended

to have the edge on me in our daily life, so it would be a shame not to take advantage of a chance to tweak him a little. “Anyway, Hikaru-san, as far as why that Slime thing turned into you, I have to think it has something to do with that choker Romilda gave you.”

“Can’t really think of anything else,” I said. That was about the only thing that had changed recently.

Shinichi-san’s theory was that the gelatinous stuff had always gone along with the choker; that it was a way of, for example, making a body double for someone. The goo copied the physical form of whoever put on the choker, then could be controlled remotely by the person in question, like an avatar in an online game. And because one person’s consciousness obviously couldn’t control two bodies at once, the original body remained asleep.

“So I’m thinking that if you take the choker off, maybe your consciousness will go back to your real body.”

That would be the natural conclusion, sure enough. I could go back to my own body. That should make me happy.

So why didn’t it?

“That’s...” I just couldn’t lose myself with joy.

“Hikaru-san?” Shinichi-san sort of half stood up from the sofa, looking at me, puzzled. I guess he had been on his way to go to the room—my room—where my male body was sleeping to take off the choker. But my show of hesitation stopped him. Minori-san, Myusel, and Elvia all looked at me in surprise. I could see why they would think it was strange. Wouldn’t a person normally be eager to get back to their own body? But...

If I go back to my male body...

Would I still be able to share the same closeness with Elvia, like we’d had in the bath today? Different gender. Same gender. That one thing made all the difference in how people reacted to you. It sort of had to. Actually, to be fair, I didn’t think Elvia would attach that much significance to it. But I had no confidence that *I* could still interact with *her* the same way. We’d had that conversation in the bath exactly because I had been in a girl’s body.

“I grant your guess is probably right, but... could we wait a bit before we take the choker off?” I said. “It’s a good theory, but it’s still just a theory. Maybe the choker doesn’t have anything to do with it after all. Or if it does, what if there’s some order we’re supposed to follow to take it off, one that could be dangerous to mess up? What if my consciousness never comes back? What if it vanishes from this body, and the other one doesn’t wake up? I sure wouldn’t want that.”

“Well...” Shinichi-san started, but there wasn’t much else he could say. I thought my reasons were pretty convincing, if I did say so myself. And they weren’t completely outside the realm of possibility.

The whole choker-body double connection was just a theory.

“True enough,” Minori-san said. “All fair points.” She and Shinichi-san nodded at each other.

“Right now, there’s nothing really problematic about this body other than being an unfamiliar gender,” I said. “I’d like to wait and see how things go for a bit. Maybe Her Majesty can discover something more certain.”

And with that, the day’s discussion of the “Ayasaki Hikaru Gender Swap Incident” concluded.



My consciousness gradually floated up from the depths of sleep. I opened my eyes, and was aware of waking up.

“.....Mn.”

The sunlight coming in through the window seemed so bright. I reflexively closed the eyes I’d just opened, and waited for them to adjust to the light. I blinked a few times, and when it no longer hurt, I finally opened my eyes all the way and took in what was around me.

The first thing I saw was myself, sleeping peacefully beside me. After my decision the night before to stay in my female body a while longer, I’d chosen to sleep beside my original body. I admit it was a slightly unsettling experience, but I wanted to be right there if anything happened. Notwithstanding how surreal it was to fall asleep looking at your own face.

“Mn... Mnnn.....”

I gave a lazy stretch and sat up. My whole body felt strangely lethargic, like my joints and muscles were too loose, too easy to move. I couldn’t remember having that sensation yesterday, but maybe I’d been unconsciously storing up anxiety since turning into a woman. Anyway, this was no time to be enjoying a doze. It would take me half an hour to do my makeup, and another half an hour to do my hair. That was an hour just getting ready for the day. That much hadn’t changed since I’d become a woman; if anything, I had to pay even more attention than before. And I had to be careful in case anything was subtly different, which could be a headache.

At this house, we all ate breakfast together. It wouldn’t do for me to make everyone wait because I was running late.

I got out of bed. Feet on the floor. And that was when I noticed something... off.

No—that wasn’t quite the right word for it. It was something deeper than “off.”

“No...” I mumbled, unbelieving.

I quickly ran a hand over my body. Even with clothes on, I could

tell that two things that had been there yesterday weren't anymore. And down below, something that hadn't been there yesterday, was. All of which meant...

I touched a hand to my neck. The choker was there.

"I'm... back to normal...?" I whispered. I looked back at the "me" sleeping on the bed. There *she* was, still dressed in the pajamas I'd put on last night. Shinichi-san and I had both guessed that that body could have been created by the gelatinous slime from the coffin, but the other Ayasaki Hikaru was still very much there, with no sign of being about to collapse into shapeless goo.

Was it possible the thing couldn't go back to its original form after taking on someone's body?

"Ah... That would explain the coffin shape." I nodded to myself. If all you needed was something to store some gelatin in, there was no call to shape it like a coffin. A ball, or maybe a cylinder, might have made more sense.

"Geez..."

I sighed, not quite sure what I felt. I was sort of relieved—and sort of disappointed. Whatever the stuff was, evidently your consciousness just automatically returned to its original body with enough time. The weird sensation I'd felt in my joints and tissues was probably just from not moving them for an entire day. Kind of like how when you oversleep, your body can actually feel slower and heavier than normal.

In any event, I guess my adventures as a girl had had a time limit on them. I took off the choker and placed it on my desk. I marched in place, swung my arms, and otherwise made sure to move my body a bit. I still felt some of that fatigue, but I'd lived in this body for close to twenty years, and it was comfortably familiar. In fact, this being morning, there was a certain part of me that had *really* woken up...

"Sigh..." I looked back and forth between the male body I was in now and the female one lying on the bed. I guess I should have been happy to be back to my old self. But I couldn't help feeling a certain loneliness, too. It was funny, not to really understand what I myself was feeling.

"Eh... Oh well." I let out another breath and set about doing my makeup. This body had gone without for a whole day, and it looked like this could take a while. I turned to the mirror and got to work.



The next day, we took the female me and the choker to Eldant Castle. The mages were desperate to get their hands on them, I gathered. It was a little disturbing to see something with my face

carted away like a corpse, but I was sure it was better for everyone if they had a chance to take a good look and figure out what it was. Besides, if we kept it around without knowing exactly what it could do, who knew what might happen? (I was thinking here about the “forbidden armor” that had bedeviled Shinichi-san not too long ago.)

“So I guess, uh, that means it’s all over, huh?” Shinichi-san said. He and the others were all thrilled that I’d gotten my own body back. Thrilled... That would be the normal way to feel.

Even Elvia was in on it: “Good for you!” she said, smiling as brightly as ever. Her attitude toward me... hadn’t changed, really. I guess she’d meant what she’d said in the bath, about me being her friend regardless of whether I was a man or woman. Maybe the fact that I couldn’t quite feel happy about all this only showed how twisted I was.

In any event, we went back to our normal lives. Nothing changed. It was all the same familiar routine, as if the whole me-turning-into-a-girl thing had never happened. And that was great, as far as it went. Life was easier for me in my accustomed body, in any number of ways.

“Okay...” Back home from school, I shut the door to my room, passing the time until dinner with some miscellaneous work. That, too, was just as usual. But then...

“Hikaru-sama!”

With no warning, the door to my room burst open. I looked over, startled, to find Elvia standing there with a big grin on her face.

“Elvia...”

“Borrowed the key from Myusel!”

“Not what I was really worried about. You remember our conversation the other day about knocking?”

“Hee hee. Sorry ’bout that.” She stuck out her tongue playfully; she clearly didn’t mean any harm. I thought about scolding her a little more, but I suddenly felt tired, and instead I sighed.

“All right. What do you want?”

“Ahem!” Elvia smiled even wider as if to say *I’m glad you asked*. “Here, I drew this.” She walked over to where I was sitting in my chair and produced something from behind her back. It was a sheet of paper about the size of a B4 page—a picture. “You can have it, Hikaru-sama. I mean, if y’ like.”

“This is...”



Me. The picture was me. It was a portrait from the neck up—by the specific design of the Gothic-Lolita dress and the fact that I wasn't wearing the choker, I could tell this was a drawing of the girl I'd been shortly before.

I took the page, feeling a little dazed. I looked at Elvia, asking *Why?* with my eyes, and she scratched her nose with her pointer finger, a bit embarrassed. "Aw, I just thought y' looked so pretty Hikaru-sama, I couldn't help wantin' to draw you."

"So the way I was..." I was right; it was a picture of my female body. But what could I say? After a moment, I asked, "...Was I really that pretty?"

"The prettiest!" Elvia said, clenching her fist emphatically. "Course, you're always pretty, Hikaru-sama! But it's just, like, uhh..."

I could see what she wanted to say: she wanted to praise my girl body, without implying that my usual male body wasn't good enough, and she just didn't know the words. Something like that.

Watching Elvia squirm as she tried to figure out what to say, I couldn't suppress a smile. "I get it, I do. Thank you, Elvia." I looked at her picture and half-closed my eyes. Just because I was back to my normal body, it didn't mean the events of a few days before hadn't happened. Yes, Elvia still treated me like she always did. It didn't matter whether I was a woman or man, or whether I was a man who'd become a woman and then went back to being a man. She was just like she always was—not the sharpest sometimes, but certainly the most open and sure of herself. Enough that I could almost be jealous.

So...

"It makes me really happy," I said. And, being careful not to wrinkle or fold the page, I hugged the picture to my chest.

(づづく)

To be continued...

Afterword

Hullo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 14 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

I finally made good on my promise and actually did another short story collection, just like I said I would in Volume 13. I meant to get around to this a little sooner, but each time I tried to write one of my short stories, it turned out to be a long story (Volume 12, for example), so it's been a long and winding road, but hey, here we are, know what I mean?

If you're curious, the earliest idea I had for any of the stories in this book was the one about Brooke and Cerise's children. I actually considered doing this all the way back in Volume 7, but I just couldn't shake the side-character vibe the lizardman couple had, so I put it off.

People who hate reptiles tend to really hate them, and I'm not saying they're my favorite thing in the world, but when you get a good look at those gemlike black eyes, they're really pretty cute. I gather reptiles actually make up a pretty substantial proportion of the pet industry.

My wife is especially fond of frogs, but I guess she has a thing for reptiles, too, and once she even had a Sudan plated lizard as a pet. As a matter of fact, I first got the idea for a story about Brooke's kid when my wife said, "I'll bet lizardman kids would be really cute."

Incidentally, in my mind, Man'ya resembled a certain blue-skinned character from one particular anime about a rat kingdom, but I'm curious what Yuugen-shi will come up with. (I had to write this Afterword before the finished illustrations were ready.) I guess, strictly speaking, I don't even know if Man'ya will show up in the illustrations. She's a loli character, true, but she's also a lizardman...

On that note, I hear that America has this special over-18 genre specifically involving dragons... so does that mean there are people over there who would be way moe for a loli lizardman? (One who likes to bite, if you know what I mean.) I'm sure there must be such a person, somewhere in this vast world of ours! ...But maybe not *two* such people.

Anyway, I digress. The story about Shinichi going full shut-in is a pretty old one too; it's one of a few different story ideas I came up

with back when the anime was running. One of the anime's original episodes features Petralka becoming a shut-in; maybe that influenced this concept. Unlike the anime, though, there was nothing cute about his being a shut-in here, and it didn't amount to much. So I fiddled around with it a bit, and it ended up forming a sort of epilogue to the forbidden armor story. It worked out pretty nicely.

And so but anyway.

That would make the newest of these three short stories—the episode I came up with specifically to add to the other two stories to get a whole short story collection—the one about Hikaru's "sex change." I'd been entertaining the idea of a story involving Hikaru and Elvia since around Volume 8, but I never really meant to write it out as a full "episode"; it was just one of those back-story things in my head. But with the battle scene in Volume 12, the editor sort of noticed where I was going. There was a request: "We'd really like to see Hikaru turn into an actual girl." And bam, there was my short story collection.

Incidentally, regarding Hikaru's first person narration: initially I was going to do it in polite speech, the same as the way he talks (so all my dear readers could easily accept this change), but it just didn't sound quite right, and so it ended up the way it is now, in plain form. I wonder how my readers will take it.

Anyway, here we are. If everything goes according to plan, *Outbreak Company* has, let's see, three volumes left. I've already sketched out the plot from here to the final book—heck, I even know what I want Shinichi to say right at the very end.

I hope you'll be there to find out what it is!

Sakaki Ichiro
7 Nov 2015

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by Ichiro Sakaki

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Outbreak Company

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THE POWER OF MOE



✧ Ichiro Sakaki

Illustration Yuugen